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the complete review - fiction

Camera

by

Jean-Philippe Toussaint

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Title: *Camera*
Author: Jean-Philippe Toussaint
Genre: Novel
Written: 1989 (Eng. 2008)
Length: 122 pages
Original in: French
Availability: [Camera](#) - US
[Camera](#) - UK
[Camera](#) - Canada
[L'appareil photo](#) - Canada
[L'appareil photo](#) - France
[Der Photoapparat](#) - Deutschland

- French title: *L'appareil photo*
- Translated by Matthew B. Smith
- Includes an interview with Toussaint by Laurent Demoulin

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Our Assessment:

B : a fairly typical Toussaint-tale

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

Review Summaries

Source	Rating	Date	Reviewer
FAZ	.	27/1/2006	Joseph Hanimann
New Statesman	.	12/2/2009	Fatema Ahmed
The NY Times Book Rev.	.	14/12/2008	Tom McCarthy
TLS	.	24/10/2008	Lee Rourke

From the Reviews:

- "Toussaint versteht es, in knappen Zügen uns unlösbare Rätsel in den Alltag zu mischen. Seine Welt liege irgendwo zwischen Jacques Tati und Beckett, wird mitunter gesagt. Mag sein. Doch führen bei ihm die -- trotz Dauerregens spärlich vorhandenen -- Regenschirme ihr Eigenleben und sitzt Herr Godot von Anfang an mit in der Badewanne." - Joseph Hanimann, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
- "Toussaint's novels have no conventional narrative and are not improved by summary. (...) The nicest aspect of Toussaint's work is its tact. Not only are the heroes trying to keep a private space for themselves, but the reader is also given space. Far from being alienating, this feels like a mark of respect; the author is never a *claqueur* holding up placards telling us what to feel." - Fatema Ahmed, New Statesman
- "Toussaint's writing is comic in a very formal sense -- the sense in which, for example, Henri Bergson used the term. (...) While Toussaint's long, chatty sentences sometimes trick the translator Matthew B. Smith into losing his syntactical thread, this version admirably renders the frankness that makes Toussaint so alluring." - Tom McCarthy, The New York Times Book Review
- "Unlike most narratives, where action is viewed through the eye of an author's lens, Toussaint's exposure is the final picture, the end result, slowly developed in negative to capture events in reverse. *Camera* is a skilled work of fiction from a novelist who manages to transmit the complexities of an "obscene reality" through a touching surface of repetitive trivialities and wry humour." - Lee Rourke, 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.

The *complete review's* Review:

There are book-beginnings that grab a reader's attention, promising or suggesting adventure, excitement, revelation. And then there's the way Jean-Philippe Toussaint begins *Camera*, which is about as anti-climactic and anticipation-thwarting as is conceivable:

It was at about the same time in my life, a calm life in which ordinarily nothing happened, that two events coincided, events that, taken separately, were hardly of any interest, and that, considered together, were unfortunately not connected in any way.

Yes, there's a flicker of hope here -- two things happen in the life of a guy in whose life nothing ever happens ! that's got to be exciting ! -- but he dampens any possible enthusiasm: the events can hardly be of interest, and they're not even connected (i.e. just random). No, what readers are treated to is more of the same -- the narrator's calm life.

True, he mixes it up -- he goes on several trips, for example (Toussaint's protagonists almost invariably travel abroad, not that they find what they're looking for there) -- but *Camera* is another of Toussaint's novels of wandering through life in an almost random and largely uneventful pattern.

The story here begins when the narrator wants to sign up for driving lessons. He doesn't seem very serious about it -- and it turns out he'd already once had a go at it, but not seen it through -- but filling out the forms and collecting the required information, including getting a passport photo, is something that keeps him semi-occupied. Not fully occupied -- he doesn't actually try to do most of this very efficiently -- but something to sort of fall back on, where he can tell himself, 'Oh, right, I still have those forms to fill out'.

Pascale, the woman at the driving school, doesn't seem too ends-oriented either, and accepts his behaviour at face value. A relationship of sorts develops, as he drifts into being part of her world, dealing with her son and father, for example, and then going on a trip to London with her.

It can be a bit overwhelming:

I dozed in the backseat thinking about the fact that the reality with which I was grappling, far from showing the slightest signs of wearing out, seemed to have little by little hardened all around me and, finding myself henceforth incapable of extracting myself from this stone reality that was enclosing me on all sides, I presently viewed my impetus as a surge of releasing forces forever imprisoned in stone.

Supposedly 'grappling' as he dozes, the narrator wouldn't seem to have much hope, but Toussaint gives him something of a chance with the camera of the title (and the unexposed pictures in it), which he finds on the ferry ride back across the Channel. Even

as he again seems to fall into events rather than taking charge -- though he does rather impulsively take the camera, before starting to worry about the consequences -- and even as this too is rather random, it is more of an 'event' in his life than most, and comes with its own surprises.

Toussaint's protagonists excel in empty activity; they go through everyday-life's motions, often appearing at least in some way busy and active (and they travel abroad !), yet they're just spinning their wheels, going almost nowhere. The narrator here savours a moment, for example:

I grabbed a couple of chips and brought them to my mouth. There was no reason for bringing this entelechy to an end too hastily.

Life is like a movie: sit back and relax and take in the show. Yet with the nuanced passivity of his protagonists -- they're not merely thought-creatures (far from it, in fact) -- Toussaint offers an interesting and generally more appealing variation on the genre. Subtler than most of his other work, and not quite as obviously funny, *Camera* is still a solid little novella.

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Links:

Camera:

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

Reviews:

- [The Bibliophilic Blogger](#)
- [Culturofil](#) (French)
- [Deutschlandradio](#) (German)
- [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#) (German)
- [New Statesman](#)

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](#)
- [Making Love](#)
- [Monsieur](#)
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About the Author:

Jean-Philippe Toussaint was born in Brussels in 1957.

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