

LA Weekly

**Unearthing Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *The Bathroom* and *Camera*:
Comic Snapshots of Existential Angst
Being and everythingness — view from the tub**

By [Jim Ruland](#)

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Having realized that he prefers reading in the tub, the protagonist of [Jean-Philippe Toussaint](#)'s *The Bathroom* decides to take up residence there, because, after all, "the bathroom was where I felt best." This is a typical setup for the Belgian author of eight short but deliciously enigmatic novels: Toussaint puts his protagonist in an absurd position and describes it as if there's nothing absurd about it at all. The author himself has characterized his work as being focused on the "not-interesting" and the "not-edifying." This is especially true of his early novels, *The Bathroom* (1985) and *Camera* (1989), rereleased late last year by the Dalkey Archive Press (which has also published Toussaint's *Monsieur* and *Television*). But what sounds like an exercise in navel-gazing pulses with a queer kind of intensity that makes reading Toussaint as easy as slipping into a warm bath.



• He won't get out of the bathroom: Jean-Philippe Toussaint.

Our hero has inexplicably received an invitation to a gathering at the [Austrian Embassy](#). He insists it's a mistake but cannot stop daydreaming about it. He spends his days in the bathroom, eating pastries, listening to soccer matches on the radio, staring at the walls. "One crack seemed to be gaining ground. I spent hours staring at its extremities, vainly trying to surprise it in action." Fed up, his lover, Edmondsson, tries to lure him out with sex. "Make love now? I shut my book composedly, leaving a finger inside to keep my place." Toussaint traffics in a kind of slow-motion situation comedy. What makes the humor so effective is that he never appears to be going for the gag. His work is frequently compared to the silent comedies of [Buster Keaton](#), but you won't find anything as inelegant as a pratfall in Toussaint's oeuvre. He doesn't construct plots; rather, he devises pantomimes in which his reluctant heroes grapple with dilemmas largely of their own making. Whether it's the decision to suddenly leave the bathtub — and Paris — for a decrepit hotel in Venice or insulting a dinner party host's style of dress, seldom if ever do Toussaint's characters reveal what motivates them to behave as they do.

This is not to say that Toussaint's characters live unexamined lives; on the contrary, one would be hard-pressed to find in a novel a character who examines the nature of his existence as scrupulously as the protagonist of *Camera*. Improbably, it's a love story.

The affair commences when a man with a "propensity not to hasten matters" becomes smitten with a woman named [Pascale Polougaïevski](#), who works as a clerk in a driver's-education office. (While Toussaint's narrators are habitually nameless, the women are saddled with ungainly handles.) The romance proceeds in disarmingly oblique fashion:

“We made small talk while I was catching up with current events and, when her tea was ready, she asked me, yawning, if I would like a cup. Without putting down the paper, still reading, I told her no, God forbid, what’s the world coming to? But a cup of coffee, on the other hand, I said, putting down the paper, I wouldn’t turn down.”

Aside from the suitor’s fascination with Pascale’s “natural and fundamental languor,” we never find out why he thinks it’s a good idea to accompany her to pick up her son at school, or to whisk her away on the ferry for a one-night excursion in London. Motive, Toussaint seems to be telling us, is entirely beside the point, especially in the early “flu-like state” of romantic love.

Camera has no narrative thrust; its energy is frittered away in endless asides, discursions, parentheticals, etc. Yet there is an undeniable tension at work, as the protagonist moves “from the struggle of living to the despair of being.” These hypercontemplative periods invariably follow a burst of frenetic activity and restless motion. He’ll confine himself to a service-station restroom, a photo kiosk, or telephone booth and wait for the “thinning ruins of exterior reality” to give way to “a different reality, interior and peaceful.”

What is it about these slender, yearning novels that makes them so charming and compelling? How do books with almost no dialogue but obsessed with weighty topics, sound so breezy? Why do these vague and laconic yet relentlessly specific narratives penned some 20 years ago feel timeless and new?

Perhaps Toussaint’s infatuation with the quotidian is a mask for his true subject: what it means to be a human being. Though his judgments are rendered in existential fashion, they are expressed as comedies that are “purposeless and grandiose” — like life. Exit laughing.

THE BATHROOM | By Jean-Philippe Toussaint | Translated by Nancy Amphoux & [Paul De Angelis](#) | 102 pp | \$12.95

CAMERA | By Jean-Philippe Toussaint | Translated by [Matthew B. Smith](#) | 125 pp | \$12.95