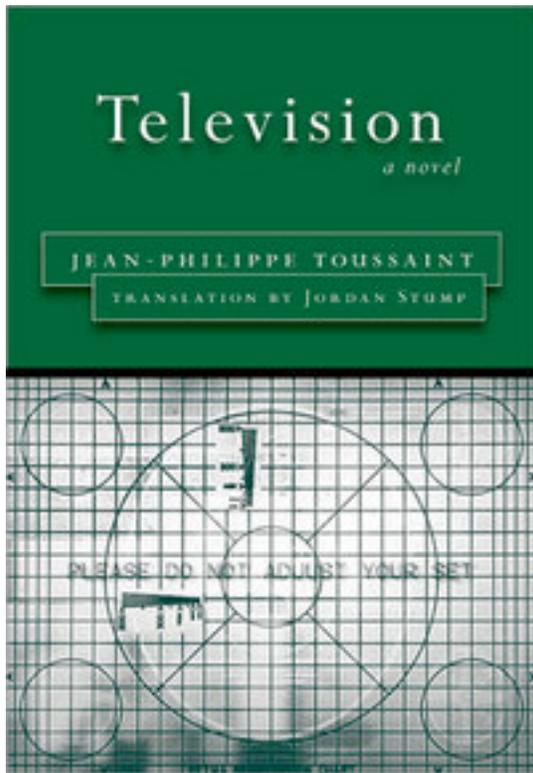


The Litblog co-op

http://lbc.typepad.com/blog/2006/04/read_this_telev_1.html

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READ THIS! - *TELEVISION* by JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT



The Litblog Co-op is pleased to announce its Spring 2006 READ THIS! Selection: *Television* by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, translated by Jordan Stump (Dalkey Archive, 2004). The weeks ahead will include a chat with the translator and discussion of the novel by members of the LBC.

We will unveil the other four considered titles over the next four days, and having week-long discussions and posts by LBC members taking up the pros and cons of each title. *Television* will be discussed the week of May 29th, six weeks away (we are taking the week of May 22th off as many of our members will be at BEA), which you gives you plenty of time to find the book, read it, and join the discussion. Now we present [Derik A Badman](#), who nominated *Television*, as he explains why you should Read This!

I first discovered the novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint while looking for a French language novel to follow up my reading of Camus' *L'Etranger* in the original language. I was not ready for the complicated and playful language of a Queneau or the descriptive vocabulary of a Flaubert. I needed something short, contemporary, and relatively

unadorned. As it is my normal method of literary discovery, I turned to other authors I respected, in this case Warren Motte and his *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction since 1990* (Dalkey Archive, 2003, a short essay by Motte follows the text in the Dalkey edition of *Television*), a collection of essays on current French literature. Motte calls Toussaint's work an "epic of the trivial" (179), a perfectly concise way to sum up the novels that have given Toussaint fame in Europe and little notice at all in the U.S. (though *Television* is the fourth of his eight novels to be translated into English). My library happened to have one Toussaint novel, *La Television*, the story of an academic who decides to stop watching television.

The narrator of *Television* is living in Berlin to work on a book about the painter Titian and art's connection to political power. His wife and child have left for a seaside vacation, and he is supposed to be writing. As the book opens he has decided to stop watching television. What follows is more a chunk of everyday life than an example of Freytag's Pyramid. The narrator goes about his days: swimming, meeting friends, "working" (mostly not, because "not writing is at least as important as writing"), washing the windows (likening the spray of washer fluid to the painting of Pollock), watering his vacationing neighbors' plants. Throughout, he seems incapable of avoiding the ever glowing gaze of the television set. The ubiquitous television and the conflicting relationship we have with it provides the thematic structure for the book, which both begins and ends with a renunciation.

The narrative voice is the stylistic star of the novel. The protagonist narrates his own story as if he were telling it to a stranger, not in a literary approximation of colloquial speech but in a casual manner that leaves out details and jumps around into the narrative past. Toussaint is a master of this style that presents us with a narrator who is not necessarily unreliable but not completely forthcoming either. The gap between how the narrator sees himself and how we see the narrator provides a great deal of the humor in the novel, and it is quite a funny novel.

My first reading of Jordan Stump's translation of the novel was my third reading of the book. In switching the language in which one reads a book, one might find the experience of a very different book, but the voice Stump creates in English was familiar to me and just as enjoyable.

Even after three readings, I find the book a funny and joyful read. There is something here that leaves me with a feeling of both the strangeness and banality of life. My hope in nominating this novel for the LBC is to share my interest in the fiction of everyday life, as well as spreading the word on a contemporary translated work and another fine book from Dalkey Archive Press.

Posted by The Litblog Co-op in [SPRING 2006 - Television](#)