

Crédito

Fecha

Entrevistado

Intro del tema

“Do you like the Stooges?” Michel Houellebecq asked me on the second day of our interview. He put down his electric cigarette (it glowed red when he inhaled, producing steam instead of smoke) and rose slowly from his futon couch. “Iggy Pop wrote some songs based on my novel *The Possibility of an Island*,” he offered. “He told me it’s the only book he has liked in the last ten years.” France’s most famous living writer flipped open his MacBook and the gravelly voice of the punk legend filled the kitchenette, chanting: “It’s nice to be dead.”

Michel Houellebecq was born on the French island of La Réunion, near Madagascar, in 1958. As his official Web site states, his bohemian parents, an anesthesiologist and a mountain guide, “soon lost all interest in his existence.” He has no pictures of himself as a child. After a brief stay with his maternal grandparents in Algeria, he was raised from the age of six by his paternal grandmother in northern France. After a period of unemployment and depression, which led to several stays in psychiatric units, Houellebecq found a job working tech support at the French National Assembly. (The members of parliament were “very sweet,” he says.)

A poet since his university days, he wrote a well-regarded study of the American science-fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft in 1991. At the age of thirty-six, he published his first novel, *Whatever* (1994), about the crushingly boring lives of two computer programmers. The novel attracted a cult following and inspired a group of fans to start *Perpendiculaire*, a magazine based on a movement they called “depressionism.” (Houellebecq, who accepted an honorary place on the masthead, says he “didn’t really understand their theory and, frankly, didn’t care.”) His next novel, *The Elementary Particles* (1998), a mixture of social commentary and blunt descriptions of sex, sold three hundred thousand copies in France and made him an international star. So began the still fierce debate over whether Houellebecq should be hailed as a brilliant realist in the great tradition of Balzac or dismissed as an irresponsible nihilist. (One flummoxed *New York Times* reviewer called the novel “a deeply repugnant read.” Another described it as “lurch[ing] unpleasantly between the salacious and the psychotic.”) The *Perpendiculaire* staff was offended by what they saw as his reactionary denunciation of the sexual-liberation movement and booted him from the magazine.

Several years later, his mother, who felt she had been unfairly presented in certain autobiographical passages of the novel, published a four-hundred-page memoir. For the first and last time in his public life, Houellebecq received widespread sympathy from the French press, who were forced to concede that even the harsh portrait of the hippie mother in *The Elementary Particles* didn’t do justice to the self-involved character that emerged from her autobiography. During her book tour, she famously asked, “Who hasn’t called their son a sorry little prick?”

In 2001, Houellebecq published *Platform*, about a travel agency that decides to aggressively promote sexual tourism in Thailand. In the novel this leads to a terrorist attack by Muslim

extremists. Some views expressed by his main character ("Every time I heard that a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child or a pregnant Palestinian woman, had been gunned down in the Gaza Strip, I felt a quiver of enthusiasm at the thought of one less Muslim") led to charges of misogyny and racism, which Houellebecq has yet to live down, to his evident dismay. "How do you have the nerve to write some of the things you do?" I asked him. "Oh, it's easy. I just pretend that I'm already dead."

During an interview while promoting *Platform*, Houellebecq made his now notorious statement: "Et la religion la plus con, c'est quand même l'Islam." (An unsatisfying mild translation is "Islam is the stupidest religion.") He was sued by a civil-rights group for hate speech and won on the grounds of freedom of expression. "I didn't think Muslims had become a group that took offense at everything," he explains. "I knew that about the Jews, who are always ready to find a strain of anti-Semitism somewhere, but with the Muslims, honestly, I wasn't up to speed." In 2005, he published *The Possibility of an Island*, about a future race of clones.

Given Houellebecq's reputation for getting drunk and making passes at his female interviewers, I was slightly apprehensive as I rang the doorbell of his modest short-term rental in Paris. But during the two days we spent together, he was scrupulously polite and rather shy. Wearing an old flannel shirt and slippers, he was clearly suffering from a bout of his chronic eczema. He spent most of the interview seated on the futon, smoking. (He is trying to cut down from four packs a day, hence the electric cigarette.) We spoke French and, very occasionally, English, a language Houellebecq understands quite well. Each of my questions met with a funereal silence, during which he blew smoke and closed his eyes. More than once I began to wonder whether he had fallen asleep. Eventually the answer would emerge, in an exhausted monotone which grew only slightly less weary the second day. His follow-up e-mails were whimsical and charming.

Houellebecq has won many major French literary prizes, though not the coveted Goncourt, which many in the French literary establishment feel has been unfairly withheld. He has also published several volumes of poetry and essays. Some of his poems have been set to music, and Houellebecq has performed them in Parisian nightclubs. France's first lady, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy has also recorded a song based on his poetry. Most recently, Bernard-Henri Lévy, the other public intellectual the French love to hate, collaborated with him on *Public Enemies*, an exchange of letters between the two men, which is scheduled to appear in translation next winter. His latest novel, *La Carte et le Territoire*, appears in France this September.

Currently single, Houellebecq is twice divorced and has a son by his first marriage. Since 2000, he has lived on Ireland's west coast and spends his summers at his condominium in Andalusia.

INTERVIEWER

Who are your literary precursors?

HUELLEBECQ

Recently I've wondered. My answer has always been that I was very struck by Baudelaire, by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, by Dostoyevsky and, a little later, by Balzac. All of which is true. These are people I admire. I also love the other Romantic poets, Hugo, Vigny, Musset, Nerval,

Verlaine, and Mallarmé, both for the beauty of their work and for its terrifying emotional intensity. But I've started to wonder whether what I read as a child wasn't more important.

INTERVIEWER

Like what?

HOUELLEBECQ

In France, there are two classic authors for children, Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas. I always preferred Jules Verne. With Dumas, the whole historical thing bored me. Jules Verne had this exhaustive vision of the world that I liked. Everything in the world seemed to interest him. I was also very struck by the tales of Hans Christian Andersen. They upset me. And then there was *Pif le chien*, a comic book published by Editions Vaillant and sponsored by the Communist Party. I realize now when I reread it that there was a Communist bent to many of Pif's adventures. For example, a prehistoric man would bring down the local sorcerer in single combat and explain to the tribe that they didn't need a sorcerer and that there was no need to fear thunder. The series was very innovative and of exceptional quality. I read Baudelaire oddly early, when I was about thirteen, but Pascal was the shock of my life. I was fifteen. I was on a class trip to Germany, my first trip abroad, and strangely I had brought the *Pensées* of Pascal. I was terrified by this passage: "Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition." I think it affected me so deeply because I was raised by my grandparents. Suddenly I realized that they were going to die and probably soon. That's when I discovered death.

INTERVIEWER

What other authors affected you?

HOUELLEBECQ

I read a lot of science fiction. H. P. Lovecraft and Clifford Simak. *City* is a masterpiece. Also Cyril Kornbluth and R. A. Lafferty.

INTERVIEWER

What attracts you to science fiction?

HOUELLEBECQ

I think sometimes I need a break from reality. In my own writing, I think of myself as a realist who exaggerates a little. But one thing definitely influenced me in *The Call of Cthulhu* by H. P. Lovecraft: his use of different points of view. Having a diary entry, then a scientist's log, followed by the testimony of the local idiot. You can see that influence in *The Elementary Particles*, where I go from discussions of animal biology, to realism, to sociology. If not for science fiction, my biggest influences would all belong to the nineteenth century.

INTERVIEWER

You are a fan of the nineteenth-century social reformers, especially Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism.

HOUELLEBECQ

Most people find Comte unreadable because he repeats himself to the point of madness. And medically speaking, he certainly wasn't far from insanity. As far as I know, he is the only philosopher who tried to commit suicide. He threw himself into the Seine because of a broken

heart. They pulled him out and he spent six months in a sanatorium. And this was the father of Positivism, which is considered to be the height of rationalism.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you are "an old Calvinist pain-in-the-ass." What do you mean?

HOUELLEBECQ

I tend to think that good and evil exist and that the quantity in each of us is unchangeable. The moral character of people is set, fixed until death. This resembles the Calvinist notion of predestination, in which people are born saved or damned, without being able to do a thing about it. And I am a curmudgeonly pain in the ass because I refuse to diverge from the scientific method or to believe there is a truth beyond science.

INTERVIEWER

You have a bit of a scientific background. After high school, you studied agronomy. What is agronomy?

HOUELLEBECQ

It's everything having to do with the production of food. The one little project I did was a vegetation map of Corsica whose purpose was to find places where you could put sheep. I had read in the school brochure that studying agronomy can lead to all sorts of careers, but it turns out that was ridiculous. Most people still end up in some form of agriculture, with a few amusing exceptions. Two of my classmates became priests, for example.

INTERVIEWER

Did you enjoy your studies?

HOUELLEBECQ

Very much. In fact, I almost became a researcher. It's one of the most autobiographical things in *The Elementary Particles*. My job would have been to find mathematical models that could be applied to the fish populations in Lake Nantua in the Rhône-Alpes region. But strangely, I turned it down, which was stupid, actually, because finding work afterward was impossible.

INTERVIEWER

In the end you went to work as a computer programmer. Did you have previous experience?

HOUELLEBECQ

I knew nothing about it. But this was back when there was a huge need for programming and no schools to speak of. So it was easy to get into. But I loathed it immediately.

INTERVIEWER

So what made you write your first novel, *Whatever*, about a computer programmer and his sexually frustrated friend?

HOUELLEBECQ

I hadn't seen any novel make the statement that entering the workforce was like entering the grave. That from then on, nothing happens and you have to pretend to be interested in your work. And, furthermore, that some people have a sex life and others don't just because some are more attractive than others. I wanted to acknowledge that if people don't have a sex life, it's not for some moral reason, it's just because they're ugly. Once you've said it, it sounds obvious, but I wanted to say it.

INTERVIEWER

The poor undesirable Tisserand is a pretty poignant character.

HOUELLEBECQ

He's a good character. Looking back, I was surprised that you could get such an interesting character from just the one springboard of his sexual frustration. The success of Tisserand was a great education.

INTERVIEWER

According to the narrator in *Whatever*, "one hates the young."

HOUELLEBECQ

That's the other part of the trap. The first is professional life, the fact that nothing else is going to happen to you. The second is that now there's this person who will replace you and who will have experiences. This leads to the natural hatred of the father for his son.

INTERVIEWER

The father and not the mother?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. There is some kind of physiological and psychological change in a woman when she gets pregnant. It's animal biology. But fathers don't give a shit about their offspring. Hormonal things occur, things that no culture can do anything about, that generally make women like children and men basically not give a damn.

INTERVIEWER

What about marriage?

HOUELLEBECQ

I think that there is a sharp contrast for most people between life at university, where they meet lots of people, and the moment when they enter the workforce, when they basically no longer meet anyone. Life becomes dull. So as a result people get married to have a personal life. I could elaborate but I think everyone understands.

INTERVIEWER

So marriage is just a reaction to . . .

HOUELLEBECQ

To a largely solitary life.

INTERVIEWER

You had trouble finding a publisher for *Whatever*. Why were editors rejecting it?

HOUELLEBECQ

I have no idea. But it didn't look much like anything that was being published at the time. I think Le Clézio was considered a great writer, for example.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of Le Clézio, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008?

HOUELLEBECQ

I haven't read him. I tried and I got bored. But as far as what was being published, there was a lot of art for art's sake, people writing in the tradition of the *nouveau roman*. There was nothing about people with office jobs.

INTERVIEWER

So you are not a fan of the *nouveau roman*?

HOUELLEBECQ

Every now and then, I like to indulge some materialist theory. One of which is that the Livres de Poche [the French paperback collection of classics] completely changed the transmission of culture and made it more international and less cohesive. I never studied literature at university. The *nouveau roman* wasn't published in Livres de Poche, so I never read one until much later. Too late really—the brain atrophies.

INTERVIEWER

And what about poetry?

HOUELLEBECQ

I think poetry is the only domain where a writer you like can truly be said to influence you, because you read and reread a poem so many times that it simply drills itself into your head. A lot of people have read Baudelaire. I had the more unusual experience of reading virtually all of Corneille. No one reads Corneille, but I came across a little pile of classics, and for some reason, I loved it. I loved the alexandrine, the traditional twelve-syllable verse. When I was at university, I wrote quite a bit of classical verse in tetrameters, which appealed to the other poets. They said, Hey, that's not bad. Why not write in classical verse? It can be done.