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American Writer Is Awarded Goncourt



By ALAN RIDING

PARIS, Nov. 6 — Jonathan Littell, a New York-born writer whose French-language novel about a murderous and degenerate SS officer has been the sensation of the French publishing season, on Monday became the first American to win France's most prestigious literary award, the Prix Goncourt.

The 903-page book, "Les Bienveillantes," was the strong favorite for the century-old prize that goes to novels written in French. Previous winners include Marcel Proust, André Malraux, Simone de Beauvoir and Marguerite Duras; non-French citizens including Tahar Ben Jelioun, Amin Maalouf and Andrei Makine have also won the Goncourt.

"Les Bienveillantes," or "The Kindly Ones," has been acquired by Harper Collins for publication in the United States and has already been sold for translation into German, Spanish,

Hebrew and several other languages. Last month the book, which has so far sold some 250,000 copies in France, won the Académie Française's annual fiction prize.

Mr. Littell, 39, who has tried to escape the circus atmosphere surrounding his sudden celebrity; even refusing to appear on television to promote his novel, recently moved to Barcelona and did not come to Paris for today's announcement.

"He hopes his absence will not be misunderstood or, even less, be interpreted as disdain for the jury," his French publisher, Antoine Gallimard, told reporters here. "He has no need for publicity, both out of modesty and because he believes that literature is not part of show business, that what's important is the book." Still, part of the novelty of "Les Bienveillantes" is that it was written in French by an American, although one who grew up in France after his father, Robert Littell, a journalist turned-thriller writer, moved the family here in the 1970s.

Later, after attending college in the United States, at Yale, Mr. Littell spent much of the 1990s working for the French humanitarian group Action Against Hunger, in conflict zones including Bosnia, Afghanistan and Chechnya.

In occasional interviews with French newspapers, he has explained that the idea for the project first came to him in 1989 after he saw "Shoah," Claude Lanzmann's landmark documentary about the Holocaust. But it was only in 2002 that he began research for the book, whose first draft he wrote in 112 days.

Mr. Littell eventually gave the manuscript to his father's agent, Andrew Nurnberg, who offered it to four French publishers under the pseudonym of Jean Petit. Editions Gallimard bought it for an advance of \$38,000 (30,000 euros) and, this summer, printed 12,000 copies. Almost immediately French critics enthusiastically responded, with one comparing it to "War and Peace" and other epic novels.

That said, "Les Bienveillantes" is improbable best seller, not only because it comprises 903 pages of all print, but also because, apart from a long-forgotten science fiction book, "Bad Voltage: A Fantasy in

published in the 1980s, this is Mr. Littell's first attempt at fiction. Written in the first person, it is the memoir of Maximilien Aue, a well-catted former SS officer who has aged to escape punishment after war and reinvented himself as a textile manufacturer in northern France. It is not a confession, though, because Aue sees no reason to apologize. Rather, it is a matter-of-fact depiction of his decadence — homosexual sadomasochism and incest with his sister — and of his murderous role in the Nazi nightmare. "Brother humans, let me tell you things happened," Aue begins, adding: "If I have finally decided to write, it is no doubt to pass time and also, possibly, to clarify one or two obscure points, perhaps for you and for myself. Moreover, I think it will do me good."

Born of a German father and a French mother, Aue notes, to explain his fluent French, that he attended secondary school and college in France. “Like most people, I did not ask to become an assassin,” he writes. “If I had had my way, as I said, I would have gone into literature.”

The war takes him to Ukraine during the massacre of Jews at Babi Yar; to Stalingrad, where he is

A story of decadence and one man’s role in the Nazi horror.

wounded; and to Auschwitz. Like Forrest Gump, he meets historical figures, in this case infamous Nazis, among them Adolf Eichmann, Albert Speer, Rudolf Hess and, in the book’s final pages, Hitler himself. All in all he personifies Hannah Arendt’s famous notion — she applied it to Eichmann — of the “banality of evil.”

Unsurprisingly, “Les Bienveillantes” has been debated here as much for its historical accuracy as for its literary qualities, with Mr. Lanzmann lamenting that Mr. Littell “is fascinated by horror and the decor of death,” and other critics complaining that the novel is weighed down by documentation. But a more typical view, like this one from the weekly *Le Point*, is that the

book “exploded onto the dreary plain of the literary autumn like a meteor.”

Every year what they call the “literary autumn” — or “*la rentrée littéraire*” — spawns a veritable avalanche of fiction, with no fewer than 475 new French novels and another

207 in translation published this season. In the summer French publishers choose which novels they will promote for various literary awards guaranteed to boost sales.

No less a ritual, though, is a heated debate about the maneuvering by French publishers that precedes these awards. Critics complain that, unlike those who select most American and British literary prizes, the same jurors for the French prizes sit in judgment for years on end, and that most are themselves writers closely aligned to leading publishers like Gallimard, Grasset and Le Seuil.

This year the credibility of the prizes was freshly battered by the timely publication of two books of journals. Jacques Brenner, a former senior editor at Grasset who died in 2001, described how publishers agreed to support one another's books on juries. In one entry in 1985, he writes that, to thank Alain Robbe Grillet for helping Bernard-Henri Levy win the Médicis prize the previous year, Grasset "will publish a bad erotic novel" by Robbe-Grillet's wife.

More topically, a diary published last month by Madeleine Chapsal, a longtime juror for the Prix Femina, included a bitter observation that last year's verdict was determined before the jury even met. This prompted the Femina jury to expel Ms. Chapsal; another juror, Régine Deforges, then resigned in solidarity. Still, this year's Femina prize awarded to the Canadian-born writer Nancy Huston for her new novel "Lignes de Faille," or "Fault Lines," was considered well deserved. As with "Les Bienveillantes" winning of 10 votes in the Goncourt jury, no one has suggested that this result was fixed.