

The postmodern masterpiece: *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair*

*The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* by the Swiss author Joël Dicker was immediately after its publication in 2012 a great success in France. For his novel Dicker was awarded the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie française and the Prix Goncourt des lycéens, and his novel was shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt 2012. The English translation appeared in 2014. Although there were some negative reviews, on the whole the novel was received favourably in the United States as well. The New York Times said: 'Dicker spins a playful, page-turning whodunit [...] If Norman Mailer had been accused of murder and Truman Capote had collaborated with Dominick Dunne on a tell-all about it, the result might have turned out something like this. Though I suspect this version may be funnier.' Indeed *page-turner* is one of the most used qualifications of Dicker's novel.

*The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* is a murder mystery, but it is also a book that is explicitly about writing, about writing a page-turner, masterpiece, bestseller, a successful, award winning novel. The two protagonists, Harry Quebert and his student Marcus Goldman, are both authors who have written a book that has made them famous. Throughout the book they talk about what it means to write and how to write a masterpiece, and their discussions may be supposed to reflect Joël Dicker's view of successful authorship. Moreover Dicker himself is also an author who has written a novel that has made him famous before he was thirty. In *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* we can look for the secret of Dicker's own success. What can a beginning writer, and what can we, learn from him?

### **Quebert and Goldman**

In part I of *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* the young author Marcus Goldman is introduced when he is trying, and failing, to write a second book after his first has made him 'the new darling of American letters'. But he is suffering from a writer's block, 'a common affliction, I am told, for writers who have enjoyed sudden, meteoric success.' (p. 19)<sup>1</sup> His publisher keeps pressing him for a second novel, but Marcus can only stare at the blank pages. So he decides to leave New York and visit his former teacher Harry Quebert, who lives in Somerset, a coastal hamlet where nothing seems to happen. Harry is a successful author himself and in his house Marcus hopes to find peace and to get useful advice to be able to write again. Shortly after his visit to Harry, the body is found of Nola Kellergan, who disappeared in the summer of 1975, the very summer when Harry first came to Somerset and when he wrote his famous novel *The Origin of Evil*. The manuscript of this book is found with the body, buried in Harry's yard. Harry is arrested on suspicion of murder and soon it becomes clear that he had a relation with the 15-year old and that the novel that made him famous was dedicated to *her*. Marcus sets out to find the truth about the case and then writes his second successful novel *The Harry Quebert Affair*, the 'best-selling book of the year', which makes him 'the most famous writer in the country'. But unexpectedly Marcus discovers he has been wrong about the case and *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* has another hundred pages to go.

*The Origin of Evil*, Harry's own famous novel that 'sold a million or more copies and won two of the country's most prestigious literary awards' is found to be inspired by his relation with Nola and in *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Joël Dicker, *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair*, translated from the French by Sam Taylor, Macle hose Press, London, 2015.

*Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* we can read fragments of this masterpiece, and we get a glimpse of their love affair:

The tragedy had occurred on an Sunday. She was miserable, and had tried to kill herself. Her heart no longer had the strength to keep beating if it was not beating for him. To live, she needed him. [...] How could someone so pretty have wanted to kill herself?

And Harry slips a letter under her pillow: *'My sweet darling, You must never die. Angels never die. See how I am never far from you. Dry your tears, I beg you. I can't bear knowing that you are sad. I send you kisses to soothe your pain.'* (p. 257).

Another example:

He knew he would never see her again, never hear her again, never find her again. [...] *'I will miss you my darling. I will miss you so much. I am crying. Inside I am burning. We will never see each other again. I will miss you so much.'* (p. 380)

Both Harry's *The Origin of Evil* and *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* centre around the love affair of Harry and Nola, and we notice that their letters and conversations consist almost entirely of declarations of love, like these:

She saw a figure on the deck, light from the house illuminating him. Harry was sitting at his big wooden table, looking out at the ocean. He jumped when she called his name. "Jesus, Nola! You scared me!" "That's how I make you feel? Scared?" She started to weep. "I don't understand ... I Love you so much. I've never felt like this..." (p. 217)

These were her last words to me, Marcus. She said, 'We'll be so happy, Harry. I'll become your wife. You'll be a great writer. And a university professor. I always dreamed of marrying a university professor. ...' (p. 335)

But although we read a lot *about* their great passion, we can only guess why Harry would be attracted to Nola. And the same applies to Harry's status as a writer. We are told *about* the success of his novel, but it is hardly credible that the fragments given are parts of one of the great works of American fiction.

At the beginning of each chapter we get parts of what Harry has taught young Marcus Goldman about becoming an author and what it means to write. His advices amount to platitudes like these:

"Harry, I have doubts about what I am writing. I don't know if it's any good. If it's worth -"  
"Put your shorts on, Marcus. And go for a run." "Now? But it's pouring rain." "Spare me your whining. Rain never hurt anyone. If you're not brave enough to run in the rain, you'll certainly never be brave enough to write a book." (p. 96)

"Who dares, wins. Think about that motto, Marcus, whenever you are faced with a difficult choice. Who dares, wins." (p. 447)

From these pieces of advice, but also from *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* as a whole we can gather what it means for Dicker to be an outstanding author: the number of copies sold (bestseller), the profit (money), fame and literary awards.

### **Joël Dicker**

By these standards Joël Dicker himself has also produced a masterpiece. His readers, many critics and the members of the juries that award literary prizes also agree on this. But not all reviews of *The*

*Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* have been positive, not *all* critics have argued that this is a great novel. Indeed the novel has remarkable deficiencies:

- Poor dialogues: all characters, the two famous authors, Nola and the simple folk in the village, speak the same kind of language. They all use the same short sentences and all have a habit of constantly mentioning the name of the person they are addressing.
- Many characters are clichés, or even caricatures: the Jewish mother, the lady of the cafeteria, the publisher.
- Poor psychological characterization: in the conversation between Harry and Nola, we only hear her say how much she loves him, almost *nothing else*. One can imagine Harry falling in love with a 15-year old girl, but why would he want to spend the rest of his life with a girl who has, literally, nothing else to say?

In spite of these shortcomings Joël Dicker's novel has been very successful in terms of copies sold, it was *The Times Number One Bestseller* and has been compared to the work of Nabokov, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote and Philip Roth. What makes his work have such an appeal to both readers and critics?

Or, if Joël Dicker were to write *The Truth about the truth about the Harry Quebert Affair*, what kind of book would that be? What considerations would we find in it?

- With a view to international success Dicker thinks that his novel has to be set in America. There is no obvious reason why the story could not be set in a Swiss village or in a sleepy French town, but this might appeal less to American readers. New England is the ideal background: some great American writers are from New England and it is the place where important American novels are set. And although the story does not really ask for it, some allusions to great American writers (e.g. Quebert's lawyer is called Roth) may also help to create a literary atmosphere.
- The intellectual milieu of literature and university that forms the background of main characters is placed in sharp contrast to the world of the simple folk in Somerset. And they are *very* simple people who know nothing of the life of the intellectuals living among them and have an extreme, and almost ridiculous, admiration for writers.
- A sex scandal may help making the story more juicy, but it is risky as well, especially when it is called paedophilia. So, Dicker decides, Harry does not have relation with a girl of 12, but with a 15-year-old. Readers may think: so what? It may be against the law, bad taste, inappropriate, but paedophilia? So, again, the reader has to be *told*, that people all over the United States are outraged: 'The whole country is rising up against me. Everyone wants me dead. They are calling me a pedophile, a pervert, a psycho. They're burning my books.' (p.177)
- Write a thick book, this in itself may impress the reader, or at least be noted ('heftier than a suburban county phone book').
- Be always one step ahead of the critics. Point out that literary prizes are usually awarded to 'serious' novels, not to murder mysteries, but what is wrong with a book that so many people enjoy reading, a page-turner? ('this idea that literature must be difficult...')

It was the awarding of several literary prizes that has initiated a discussion about the qualities of *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair*. Prizes presuppose there is a standard that transcends the taste of the judges. For literary prizes this standard, the sine qua non for the awarding, may be called 'literature'. The judges then have to come to the decision which of the shortlisted works best meets the purposes of the prize and may come to an agreement as to what is the 'best' book.

The standard does not have to be something abiding and immutable. In fact, it may be the mark of a great work of art that it has been able to expand and change the norms and this in itself may be a reason to award a (literary) prize.

A work of art, a novel, that does not meet the requirements may be a failure, but it may also be something entirely new, surprising, an avant-garde work that changes the outlook of the critics and of the readers. Avant-garde then means that there has been a shift in culture, i.e. the literature of an age, that it has taken a different direction and that others may (and will) follow.

When the awarding of literary prizes leads to a such controversy as in the case of *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair*, the juries may have got it all wrong, or we may be dealing with an avant-garde work which has caused a shift in the standard of literary criticism. Some critics will argue the first, but there are also indications that indeed there has been a change in literary appraisal. The fact that the juries have overlooked the bad dialogues and many clichés may be an indication that they have been misled by Dicker's pretensions. But the widely shared enthusiasm for the novel can also mean that these disadvantages are not so important anymore and that there has indeed been a shift of standard. The literary discourse itself has changed.

### **The postmodern discourse**

What has changed? Until recently academics and critics dominated the literary discourse, while the larger part of the readers read novels mainly for their amusement and as a pastime. 'Literary' and 'literature' can be seen as normative terms that have always excluded e.g. novelettes and crime novels. But the participants of the amusement discourse are not willing to put up any longer with their exclusion from a discourse, that seems to matter more than their own propositions. Their opinion has to be considered and on television and through the internet they have claimed their place in the literary discourse. On the other hand the 'specialists' have opened their discourse for anyone who wants to contribute and within the discourse that is left, the majority rules. There is no reason to exclude anyone. The prevailing opinion has acquired such authority that it has become capable of directing the view of both experts and juries. There is no criterion, no standard but the vox populi, the voice of the majority on the internet that cannot be denied. This is a 'postmodern' phenomenon:

'Postmodernist thought sees the culture as containing a number of perpetually competing stories, whose effectiveness depends not so much on an appeal to an independent standard of judgement, as upon their appeal to the communities in which they circulate ( Christopher Butler, *Modernism*, p. 29).

Jean-François Lyotard gives the following description:

... to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. [...] Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. (The Postmodern Condition, pp.xxiii-xxiv)

This is the same kind of grand narrative that has disappeared in the process of secularisation. *Postmodern* means that in debates on works of art, music, poetry and novels there are no predetermined norms. The comprehensive study of literature that we may expect to formulate a

standard to determine whether a novel can be classified as 'literature' or merely amusement, now has a problem in legitimating its criteria. These are not given in advance and not exclusively known to a restricted number of insiders and specialists. The literary debate is an open discussion that anyone can join, and in which the opinion of one (expert, critic) does not carry more weight than the opinion of another (common reader, enthusiast).

Avant-garde art is aimed at the meta-discourse itself. In the past an attack on the grand narrative often met with much resistance and sometimes developed into a revolution, but in the postmodern era no one is prepared, or has a reason, to defend the old criteria at all costs. In fact the critics have adopted the rules of the new discourse.

So in the case of *The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* there is a remarkable consensus. A deviating opinion does not affect it and does not have to be refuted. The general (truth, value) has been replaced by the common (agreement) and contradiction has become easier, but also less important and less relevant. The awarding of a major literary prize to Joël Dicker is, just as the awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature to Bob Dylan, the result of the predominance of the postmodern discourse. The 'modern' discourse that refers to a meta-discourse that justifies and explains the norms it upholds has lost this legitimization and has transformed into a postmodern uninvolved debate that can lead to any outcome.

*The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair* has shown this change of paradigm. The novel cannot be called avant-garde for it does not offer any new perspectives for art or the way we look at the world. On the contrary: we may now, retrospectively, label many novels 'literature' that were formerly dismissed. But fortunately the attention of the public is awakened only by the next hype. And this offers opportunities for any author who has learned something from Joël Dicker.

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