
Author

Born in Port-au-Prince in 1953, **Dany Laferrière** worked as a journalist in Haïti before moving to Canada in 1976. He also worked as a journalist in Canada, and hosted a television program for the TQS network. Laferrière published his first novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* [How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired] in 1985. The novel was later adapted into a screenplay by Laferrière and Richard Sadler, and earned a Genie Award nomination for best adapted screenplay in 1990. His short stories have also been adapted into the recent film *Heading South*. He received the Prix Médicis for *L'énigme du retour*. Laferrière divides his time between Montreal, Quebec, and Miami.

Translator

David Homel was born in Chicago and lives in Montreal. He is the author of eight novels, the latest being *Midway*. He has extensively translated the Canadian Haitian writer Dany Laferrière, as well as many other French and French-Canadian authors. As well, Homel works as a journalist, filmmaker and teacher.

The World is Moving Around Me

Nonfiction

My Nephew

I stepped out into the yard with my nephew. The little shacks on the other side of the ravine stood up to the earthquake. The old wall collapsed. We sit on the hood of the car.

"I'm going to write something," I say.

"OK . . ."

"I'm going to write about this."

I still can't give it a name.

"I understand," he says in a serious voice.

It's like he's matured overnight.

"What are you thinking about?"

A dog trots up the street. What can it live off, now that people are as destitute as it is? It looks thin and agile enough to scavenge something to eat in the ruins.

"May I ask you something, Uncle?"

It sounds like something serious.

"I'm listening."

"I'd like to write something about this . . ."

"Nothing is stopping you."

His head is lowered, but I can tell he hasn't finished.

"What's wrong?"

"I'd like you not to write about it."

The boy certainly knows what he wants.

"It doesn't work like that, you know." I show him my black notebook. "As you can see, I've been taking notes nonstop."

"No," he says, laughing, "that's not what I mean. You can write your journal, but not a novel."

Completely taken aback, I listen as he explains in great detail that this is the event of his time, and not mine. Mine was the dictatorship. His is the earthquake. And his sensitivity will speak of it.

"I can't promise you that. No one book takes the place of another."

I give my point of view. In any case, that kind of novel is not up my alley. It would take a kind of power I don't possess. Besides, nature has already written it. This grandiose novel in the classical style features a place (Haiti), a time (4:53 p.m.), and more than two million characters. You'd have to be Tolstoy to take up a challenge like that. I watch his determined expression. Homer believed that the gods send us misfortune so that we might make poetry of it. Tolstoy, Homer: we imagine ourselves as they were before we start writing. But what if this young man has what it takes? Just as I'm leaving, my mother slips an envelope into my pocket.

The Parish

We had to make a long detour to reach the Delmas highway. I open the envelope and find a picture of the Virgin. On the back, in pencil, in a trembling hand, is written that this image was blessed by the priest of Altagrâce, the church my mother has been attending since the family has lived in Delmas. It's more difficult to adapt to a new church than a new neighborhood. When we were in Carrefour-Feuilles, she went to Saint-Gérard. She knew the church well, since it was the same one she attended when we lived in Lafleur-Duchêne, though we were a lot closer to the Saint-Alexandre church. She went to Mass at Saint-Gérard for more than thirty

years, which helped her get to know her neighbors. People meet at the market or at church. At first, she had all sorts of complaints about Altagrâce—even the priest’s accent exasperated her. She didn’t like the poor people at Altagrâce; they were too aggressive compared to the Saint-Gérard parishioners. But now she couldn’t picture herself anywhere else. You should have heard her heartfelt “Hallelujah” when I told her Altagrâce had been spared. I have no news about Saint-Gérard, but people say that Carrefour-Feuilles is in ruins.

How Georges Died

There are cars in the supermarket parking lot. A dozen or so. We pull into a space. Inside, complete chaos. In the wine section, half the bottles are on the floor. We walk on broken glass through a pond of red wine. The shelves are nearly empty. Saint-Éloi manages to get his hands on a few cans of sardines. We pick up a dozen bottles of water. People are chatting as they wait to pay. No electricity: the clerk is concentrating on the little pad of paper on which he adds up the bills. Behind me, an overwrought photographer is announcing the death of Georges and Mireille Anglade. I saw them last night at the hotel where they were attending a private reception. Always that mischievous look in Georges’ eye. Such warmth in the way he opens his arms to welcome you. Mireille waits patiently for Georges to finish crushing you to his chest by way of embrace. Mireille is more delicate, with more nuances of feeling, but no less warm. A riddle of a smile. As always, Anglade was laughing, and every inch of flesh on his body danced. These last years, he put all his energy into promoting the *lodyans*, this narrative form so close, he maintained, to our way of seeing the world. He believed that Haitians are born storytellers who nowadays express themselves in writing. Recently he reread a good proportion of our fiction (“from Independence to the present,” he said, in his usual exuberant fashion) and discovered that our best writers were all nocturnal storytellers. Our writing has its wellspring in that orality—that “oralature,” as he likes to call it. Georges was exaggerating, of course, but with such a good heart. The man had a kind of energy that swept you along with it. He loved endless discussions at the dinner table with old friends. A geographer who was also a politician, his true passion was literature. An incorrigible dreamer—that’s what he was. I can’t imagine him without Mireille. They died together.

The Sad-Eyed Man

Standing near the fence by the tennis courts, I see Chantal Guy pull up. She’s a journalist with the Montreal daily *La Presse*, and Ivanoh Demers, the photographer, is right behind her. They’re both alive, and now they’re inseparable. When I was lying in the yard behind the hotel, with everything collapsing around me, I thought of Chantal Guy. I’d insisted so strongly that she

come here, even though she had her doubts. It's always difficult to convince people to come to Haiti. First they agree, because the country still has a fascination. An intense exchange of letters follows, then silence. Friends and relations recommend against the trip. They go on Internet sites that portray an extremely dangerous place. Panic sets in. In the end, the answer is no. With Chantal Guy, I did more than insist: I argued against each of her hesitations. For me, it was important for this delegation of Quebec writers to be accompanied by a good journalist. Besides, she's a friend of mine. I've been living in Quebec for thirty-four years, I know everyone on the literary scene, I've read most writers working today, and I felt it was time that Quebec writers come and see how Haitians live in their own country. I don't think it's healthy to have a good friend who knows you so well, who has looked into the hidden zones of your life, but who has no idea of the country you come from. Watching TV documentaries isn't enough to know a culture. If you want to get a real idea of things, especially for a journalist, you have to be on the ground. Smell the earth, touch the trees, and meet people in their natural environment. I'm not blaming anyone. I was just hoping for a dialogue between writers from Quebec and Haitian writers, who represent the two largest French-speaking populations in the Americas. Chantal Guy held out, but finally agreed. And now the earthquake. That's why I thought of her at that critical time. Especially when I heard (that night there were so many rumors) that the Hotel Villa Créole where she was staying was heavily damaged. And now here she comes, making her entrance like Venus arising from the flames, with the photographer Ivanoh Demers on her heels. He looks ill at ease. Port-au-Prince was a revelation for Chantal Guy. She used to be a girl who was afraid of her own shadow, but now she is an intrepid warrior ready to face the fury of the elements. As for Demers, the photos he took that day turned him into the most famous photographer on the planet, at least for the week. His pictures were published in papers around the world. And his moving photo of the young boy lifting his eyes to us with a mixture of pain and gravitas will remain in our memories. The gentle light on his face conjures up the Flemish masters. Yet the photographer himself is torn between his sudden celebrity and the city in ruins, since one can't exist without the other. He shouldn't feel bad. His photo of the young boy's gentle expression will last.

Culture

The journalist blurts out a question: What do I think of all this? She takes out her notebook. What is the value of culture in the face of disaster? Asking the question in some salon doesn't have the same resonance as it does here. I look around me and it's easy to evaluate the situation. The conversations are lively, I heard laughter at times. People are looking for some way out. Which makes me think that when everything else collapses, culture remains. The people who are still moving will save this city. The crowd's appetite for life makes living possible

in these dusty streets. I refer to the lesson of the old naïve painters who choose to show nature in its splendor when all around there is nothing but desolation.

A Man in Mourning

He is smoking on the street corner, by the art sellers who have started to display their canvases on the walls again, in the wind, heat, and dust. Very elegant in his fine black suit. A black hat. Unconcerned by the bustling activity around him. Unmoving, he lights another cigarette. Some people keep their composure no matter what. I approach him. He offers me a smoke. We talk about this and that, avoiding the subject of the hour. Slowly I learn a little about him, and I understand he is far from being the dandy he appears to be. His mother died at the beginning of last week and he wasn't able to contribute to her funeral. His three sisters (they live in New York) paid all the expenses, even his black suit. They were supposed to leave the day before yesterday, but they postponed their departure to buy him a barbershop that was for sale not far from here. He's a barber, but he never could keep a job for long. His sisters thought it would be better if he were his own boss. This isn't the first time they've tried to help him out, but it's the first time his situation as a parasite has depressed him to the point that he considered suicide last night. He lights another cigarette (I declined his offer) and we get around to the earthquake. He was here when it happened. He went home and discovered his house was completely destroyed and that his sisters were dead in the wreckage. For a little too long, he stares at the glowing coal of his cigarette. The pain I read in his eyes is so private I realize I'm intruding. I slip away as he was taking another drag.

The Room

I decided to return to my room. The façade that overlooks the garden is damaged, but the hotel didn't collapse. Debris everywhere; there's no way of saying how bad the damage is. I go up the stairs to the third floor. From there, I can see that the lobby was ransacked. I continue my adventure without knowing what I'll find. So far, so good, but the hotel could cave in at any moment. I reach my room. The door is closed. I take out my electronic key. No chance it will work. The earthquake must have knocked out the whole electrical system. Besides, they cut the current to avoid fire. Still, I slip the card in the slot. The little green light lights up. I walk inside. The room is intact except for the television that's on the floor. I find my suitcase. The computer that someone lent me hasn't moved from the bedside table. My last two mangoes are patiently waiting for me next to the computer. I grab everything I can. I picture everyone doing the same thing at this very moment, trying to save things that matter to them. Things that might appear

useless to other people. I'd better not stay too long in the room; just being here is a major provocation. When it brushes past, Death leaves us in a frenetic state that pushes us to defy the gods. That's why I have this irresistible desire to lie down on the bed. I change my mind at the last second, realizing I'm doing something stupid. This might not be over. A new tremor could send the hotel crashing down. I don't even know how long I've been in this room. Since yesterday, I've lost all notion of time. I understand now that a minute can hold the entire life of a city. A new density for me. Finally I exit the room, leaving the door open, feeling that the card won't work a second time.

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