ESSAY

On the Grasset Affair

by Philippe Vilain

April 19, 2026

Eight Remarks on a Milieu in Search of Its Conscience



What has now come to be called the Grasset affair continues to generate a great deal of writing. Philippe Vilain, author of novels and essays published by Grasset, has spoken out on the subject. French Press reproduces this text with the kind permission of its author.

1

Literature cannot be an instrument of ideological propaganda, whether on the right or on the left. If it is reduced to that, it no longer has any reason to exist.

2

One can only endorse the proposal of a "conscience clause" in a publishing contract, so as to be able to extricate oneself from an ideological situation with which one disagrees.

3

The Grasset writers' movement of protest is salutary, even if this reaction does not carry the same coefficient of revolt and courage depending on whether it comes from a writer of renown (15,000+ copies), a writer selling on average more than 5,000 copies (the threshold triggering paperback publication), or fewer than 5,000 copies:

The first, and many of the second, will be courted by houses as prestigious as Grasset, whereas the third find themselves in great difficulty.

4

This belated commitment, of withdrawal and reaction, cannot fail to raise questions. It is not so much a commitment of principle, ideologically virtuous, as a commitment of circumstance, of good conscience, since for several years, since Bolloré took hold of Grasset and Stock, writers have continued to enrich the empire, including under the guarantee of ideological resistance embodied by Olivier Nora and Manuel Carcassonne. Why did they not leave sooner?

That said, the reasons for not withdrawing are easy to understand: loyalty to a house, a relationship of trust with the editor, fear of losing one's income and ending up unpublished.

5

If this is a genuine commitment of conscience, then one must follow one's virtuous ideas through to the end: no longer accepting distribution of books via Hachette, no longer going on Amazon, refusing paperbacks (Bolloré), no more Relay if there is success, no more promotion of books in the JDD / Europe 1 / CNews, etc.

But which writer under 5,000 copies (that is, the majority) can afford that? Virtue is a luxury, the prerogative of bankable writers.

6

Grasset's editorial policy over the past ten years would deserve examination: more and more actors, singers, politicians, journalists, people from the scene. The properly "literary" catalogue is "entertained" and "discussed," to borrow Johan Faerber's apt phrase.

Editors reserve the September *rentrée littéraire* for publishing their own books.

7

In 2017, this publisher commissioned a novel from me, asking me to "take a step sideways": to devote a novel to a well-known female figure, a condition of the contract, that is, to write a biofiction (a genre I criticize in *La Littérature sans idéal*).

The first version of this novel, *La Malédiction de la Madone*, was accepted; but after I asked whether it could come out in September, the novel was rejected on the Kafkaesque grounds that they did not recognize my voice.

For the first time in my career, overnight, at fifty, I found myself without a publisher, until Sophie Charnavel, director of Robert Laffont, and the agent Susanna Lea welcomed and supported me.

My rejected novel, *La Malédiction de la Madone*, then won the Prix Méditerranée.

8

I retain great esteem for Olivier Nora, an exemplary boss, a humanist, and I would have liked him to be my direct editor during the seventeen years spent at Grasset and nine books published.

And I even excuse him for having backed an editor of his house who, after all these years of intense collaboration (a film adapted for the cinema, notably), dismissed me brutally with a five-line email.

— Philippe Vilain

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE (MLA)

Vilain, Philippe. "On the Grasset Affair." French Press, April 19, 2026, https://frenchpress.media/publications/a-propos-de-l-affaire-grasset.