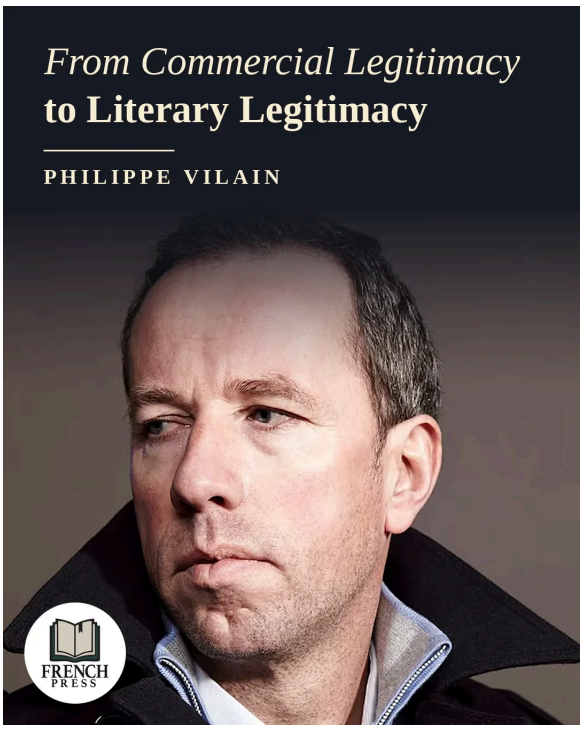
ESSAY

From Commercial Legitimacy to Literary Legitimacy

by Philippe Vilain

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The recent petition by women challenging the underrepresentation of female authors among the recipients of major literary prizes has the merit of raising an intellectually stimulating question. It starts from a situation that it interprets as sexist, without, it seems to me, sufficiently questioning the essentially commercial nature of these distinctions. For do major literary prizes primarily take into account the authors' gender, or the commercial potential of their books? More often than not, they follow commercial successes rather than challenge them.



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One need only look at the bestseller lists of recent weeks: Jaenada, Haenel, Prud'homme — the Goncourt winner and two finalists — and Désérable, the Renaudot winner. The pattern is unmistakable, and my friends will tell you that I predicted the winners a week in advance. The same was true of Mauvignier last year. The one who sells is ultimately the one who wins a prize. It is as straightforward and cynical as that. I even wonder why we still bother to get together to debate these matters. Commercial legitimacy now guarantees literary legitimacy.

The real question, then, may not be so much the place of women, although it obviously deserves to be addressed (one might think of Anne Godard, winner of the Prix Décembre, or Louise Chennevière, a Villa Médicis laureate), as the place of authors whose books sell poorly. We can safely assume that when a female author shoots to the top of the bestseller lists, she will win the prize. That is all there is to it. The exception of Brigitte Giraud's Goncourt a few years ago served as a lesson: her book was selling poorly, and the Goncourt prize, as a result, had never sold so badly.

When will we see a shortlist made up primarily of writers who sell 5,000 copies? We all know that will never happen. Yet this is where the real discrimination lies, a point I already made in my 2017 essay, *La littérature sans idéal*. Contemporary literature is judged less according to literary conventions than according to commercial ones. How many authors have I seen disappear since my first publication in 1997 simply because their books sold poorly?

Where I do agree with the petitioners is in their recommendation that gender parity be instituted in literary prizes. I would go even further and impose a system of rotation every two years for the major awards. But here again, we know that this is impossible.

For my part, despite having been publishing since 1997, having authored thirteen novels and as many essays on literature, and having published with major publishing houses, I have never received a single nomination for the Goncourt or the Renaudot. I only made it onto the first-round Femina shortlist in 2009, for *Faux père*. My two applications to the Villa Médicis were also rejected.

Does that mean I have been ostracized? Or should we simply acknowledge that the mechanisms of literary consecration are governed by forces that extend far beyond the question of the representation of women and men?

I believe it is this economic and institutional dimension of the literary world that we should also have the courage to examine. And let no one accuse me of antifeminism: I wrote my master's thesis on Duras, my doctoral dissertation on Ernaux, at a time when her work was still being challenged, and even devoted an entire essay to Duras. I did not wait to conform to the prevailing intellectual consensus before defending women's writing, unlike most of the men who champion that consensus today while, at the same time, having devoted their efforts to promoting the work of male authors. Out of a sense of collegial solidarity, I will refrain from naming them.

— Philippe Vilain

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