REVIEW

Yannick Haenel: Loneliness, Enthusiasm, and the Art of Passing Things On

by Amandine Mazas

November 24, 2026 · On *La solitude des professeurs est infinie*

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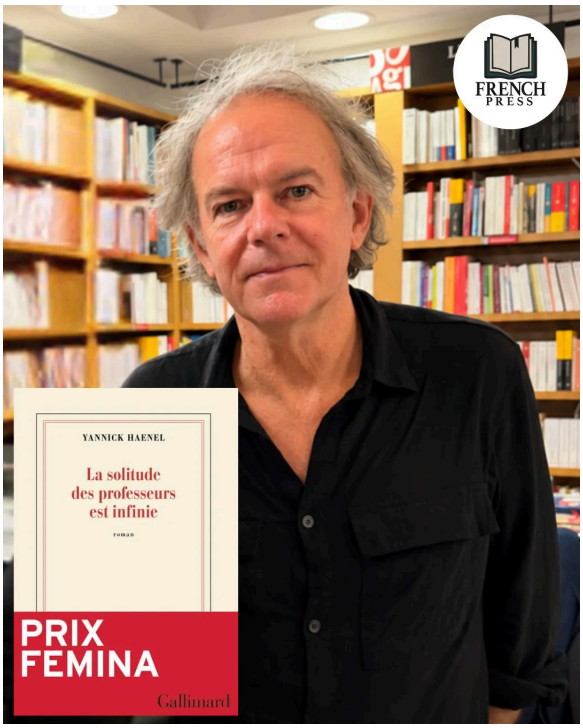

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Some novels reveal the beauty of the world without turning away from its hardships. Yannick Haenel's *La solitude des professeurs est infinie* is one of them. Behind its melancholy-sounding title lies a surprisingly luminous book, brimming with poetry, humor, and a profound love of teaching.

On Friday, November 13, 2026, Haenel visited the Millepages bookstore in Vincennes to discuss his novel, recently awarded the Prix Femina. For over an hour, the conversation ranged across literature, loneliness, the art of passing things on, memory, poetry, and our relationship to language. Skillfully moderated by the bookseller, whose perceptive questions brought out the many layers of both the novel and Haenel's work, the discussion was a fascinating one.

A few days later, having finished the book, I was struck by how closely the novel and its author's remarks seemed to share the same impulse: to look at the world clear-eyed, yet never lose one's enthusiasm for it.

A Young Teacher with the Soul of a Poet

The story takes place in the 1990s. Jean Deichel, a twenty-two-year-old newly qualified literature teacher, is beginning his teaching internship at a middle school in Mantes-la-Jolie. Passionate about literature, steeped in poetry, and driven by a genuine vocation, he approaches his new profession with almost disarming enthusiasm.

Jean is a dreamer, someone who can find beauty where others see only the mundane, or even the bleak. A suburban landscape, a shaft of sunlight, an ordinary moment: all can fill him with wonder. His gaze transforms everyday life without denying its rough edges. He is a character one quickly grows fond of. His sensitivity, occasional excesses, awkwardness, and sense of humor make him both singular and endearing.

But his daily life is far from straightforward. Institutional demands, hierarchical relationships, tensions with students, fatigue, and anxiety soon begin to undermine his aspirations. On his very first day, the school principal advises him not to smile at his students, warning that he might otherwise lose his authority. The contrast is telling: a young man eager to embrace the world encounters an educational philosophy built on suspicion and severity.

Haenel does not shy away from these difficulties. He depicts teaching as a demanding, sometimes exhausting profession within an institution full of contradictions. Yet he refuses to reduce the experience to hardship or self-pity. That is precisely what makes the novel so compelling: it acknowledges the struggles of teaching without defining teachers solely by their suffering.

During the conversation at Millepages, Haenel explained that he had no intention of writing an indictment of the school administration. Some authority figures are deliberately exaggerated, almost transformed into characters from a fairy tale. The novel is as much a comedy as it is a reflection on lived experience.

That freedom does not preclude criticism. Haenel has also spoken out against the disparagement teachers face, particularly in political and media discourse. He believes the intellectual and human dimensions of their profession are too often overlooked.

The novel finds its footing in this tension: it neither idealizes teaching nor succumbs to cynicism.

Humor in the Face of Adversity

One of the book's most delightful surprises is its sense of humor. Despite his anxieties and disappointments, Jean Deichel has a gift for self-deprecation. His description of himself as having a "trendy undertaker look" is one of those moments that inevitably brings a smile.

Elsewhere, an outrageous riff on teachers' reliance on anxiety medication conjures up the almost absurd image of an entire French education system on Xanax. The exaggeration is deliberate, sometimes biting, but never gratuitous. Beneath the irony lie the character's vulnerabilities and the strains of a profession that can take a toll on those who practice it. Humor allows him to step back, confront the absurdity of it all, and hold on to something of himself.

The novel's playful tone also keeps it moving. What draws us onward is not so much the promise of a dramatic plot twist as the pleasure of spending more time with Jean, following his experiences, encounters, and reflections. His personality carries us along. The story shifts from comedy to melancholy, from lightness to gravity, without losing its coherence. Funny one moment, sad the next, it remains consistently moving.

This tonal range gives the novel its vitality. It allows Haenel to explore the challenges of teaching without reducing his protagonist to his professional circumstances.

When Poetry Transforms the Everyday

The novel's greatest strength, however, lies in its prose. Haenel's writing is sensitive, expansive, and often lyrical. It follows Jean Deichel's reveries, observations, and inner life, lending even the most ordinary scenes a poetic dimension.

Yet poetry is never simply ornamental. It is central to the philosophical inquiry that runs through the book. Through Jean's eyes, Haenel explores how we inhabit the world, how we endure its difficulties, and how we might preserve a space of inner freedom. Reality, with all its constraints and pain, is unavoidable. But does it have to dictate the way we live? Jean seems to answer through daydreaming, literature, and an almost tender attentiveness to the world around him.

At Millepages, Haenel spoke about the overlooked beauty of suburban landscapes: their gray skies, their shifting light, and the unexpected things one might discover in seemingly ordinary places. He looks for openings in reality, for the possibility of transformation, not to deny life's darker side but to keep it from taking over entirely. This vision is closely tied to his love of painting, another recurring presence in his work. Asked about the light and landscapes in the novel, he drew a parallel between writing and painting: both involve working with a palette, trying to capture the many shades of existence. The task is not to escape the world, but to see it differently.

For Haenel, poetry is not an escape from reality. It is another way of facing it.

The Many Faces of Loneliness

Loneliness naturally lies at the heart of the novel. The word has surfaced in several of Haenel's works, from *La solitude Caravage* to *Notre solitude*, and now returns in the title of his latest book. Its recurrence invites reflection, though it would be a mistake to assign it a single, definitive meaning.

At the beginning of the Millepages discussion, the bookseller focused on the words "loneliness" and "infinite," reminding us that being alone is not necessarily the same as being isolated.

The novel explores several forms of solitude. There is the teacher's loneliness in front of his class, facing responsibilities and difficulties he sometimes has to shoulder without much support. There is the solitude of someone confronting his own vulnerabilities. And there is the isolation that pain can impose when it seems to make communication with others impossible. But there is also a more intimate kind of solitude, one that can become a space for freedom, contemplation, and creativity.

"All loners have their garden," Haenel writes.

The image of an inner garden helps us understand Jean Deichel. His solitude does not prevent him from loving others or seeking their company. At times, it allows him to preserve the distinctive gaze through which he sees the world.

During the conversation, Haenel extended this reflection to literature itself. In an age dominated by the immediacy of information and the ever-accelerating pace of discourse, he sees literature's relative isolation as an opportunity: a space where language can take its time, explore its nuances, and question its own meaning. Solitude thus becomes more than the experience of being cut off from others. It can also be a place of thought, discovery, and creation.

The paradox is striking: a novel with loneliness in its title is, from beginning to end, driven by a desire to reach others.

Passing Things On: The Most Beautiful Adventure

"To pass things on, there is nothing more beautiful in the world." This sentence perhaps captures the novel's central impulse. Through Jean Deichel, Haenel reminds us that teaching is about much more than following a curriculum or imparting knowledge.

It is also about sparking curiosity, sharing enthusiasm, awakening sensitivity, and helping others discover new ways of seeing the world. Teaching is a human, intellectual, and emotional adventure, and its most meaningful moments often arrive when we least expect them.

At Millepages, Haenel offered a particularly illuminating take on what it means to pass something on. He challenged the familiar image of the teacher as someone who possesses knowledge and simply pours it into students expected to absorb it passively. The process, he argued, is far more alive. When driven by enthusiasm, it becomes a shared experience that can transform both students and teachers. He went on to draw a parallel between a class and the act of writing.

Neither is entirely under control. There are hesitations, false starts, moments of distraction, sometimes even failures. But there are also unexpected discoveries, flashes of beauty, and new possibilities. A class, like a blank page, becomes a space for creation. This comparison sheds remarkable light on the novel: Jean Deichel is not merely trying to teach his students texts; he wants to awaken an emotion, a thought, a desire to read. There is something deeply generous about this vision. Passing things on is not about reproducing what we already know, but about making room for others to discover something of their own.

But how did Haenel's desire to write about teaching resurface years after he had left the classroom? The conversation at Millepages offered some insight into the origins of the novel.

Charlie Hebdo, Memory, and the Birth of the Novel

The November 13 meeting carried an added resonance. On the eleventh anniversary of the Paris and Saint-Denis attacks, the bookseller recalled the tragedy of 2015, as well as the January attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher supermarket.

Haenel spoke about joining the weekly newspaper in the aftermath of the murder of much of its editorial team. He recounted how the writer Marie Darrieussecq had reached out to him at a time when the newspaper was looking for new contributors to help carry on its work. He also discussed the months he spent covering the trial of the January 2015 attacks, reporting on it in his columns for Charlie Hebdo.

In the fall of 2020, the murder of Samuel Paty brought back memories of Haenel's own years as a teacher. He explained how, little by little, he felt compelled to revisit an experience he had long put aside and write about what it had meant to him. Not just the difficulties and, at times, the suffering, but also the love of teaching, the intensity of human encounters, and the intellectual joy it could bring.

This context lends the novel another dimension. Jean Deichel is Haenel's fictional double, a recurring character in his work, shaped by personal memories but also by imagination. *La solitude des professeurs est infinie* is therefore much more than an autobiographical account. Haenel transforms lived experience through fiction, embracing the freedom to exaggerate, invent, and poeticize. He is not simply documenting the realities of a profession. He is also trying to convey an existential experience, one inseparable from his relationship with language.

Literature as a Passion to Be Shared

As the conversation unfolded, it naturally broadened to the place of literature in contemporary society. Haenel spoke about a number of writers, including Goethe and Nerval, with the infectious enthusiasm that characterizes his conversations. Poetry clearly occupies a central place in his world, both as a writer and as a reader.

He also discussed his commitment to emerging writers through the literary journal *Aventures* and the book series of the same name, which he directs at Gallimard. Rather than treating literature as a fixed art belonging to the past, he is interested in the vitality of contemporary writing and the new ways writers

engage with the world.

His work as a columnist for Charlie Hebdo also came up. In response to questions from the audience, Haenel described the freedom he enjoys in choosing what to write about: books he loves, authors he admires, discoveries he wants to share, as well as his enthusiasms and his anger.

He spoke, too, about the sometimes passionate reactions of his readers and the genuine dialogue his columns can foster. In a way, this direct relationship with readers extends his former vocation as a teacher. Writing about a book, championing an overlooked author, introducing readers to a poet: these are all ways of continuing to share what matters.

As a literary columnist myself, I found this reflection particularly resonant. It reminded me that criticism is not simply about judging a work. It can open up a conversation, spark curiosity, and inspire someone to read.

A teacher in the audience asked Haenel about the growing use of artificial intelligence in education. He answered primarily from the perspective of literary creation, explaining why he refuses to hand over to a machine the intimate work of finding and composing words. His reflections on the vulnerability of language were especially striking. Searching for the right word, hesitating, risking an imperfect sentence: these are all part of what makes writing a deeply human experience. It was a thought that echoed throughout the evening, along with the conviction that literature remains an adventure in meaning, sensitivity, uncertainty, and freedom.

A Writer Whose Words Extend His Work

Beyond the richness of the discussion, the evening was memorable for Haenel himself. His way of speaking is literary, occasionally lyrical, and informed by an impressive breadth of knowledge, yet he never puts distance between himself and his audience.

His humor and self-deprecation lighten even the most serious exchanges. He listens carefully, readily admits to moments of uncertainty, and seems genuinely happy to share his thoughts.

The bookseller's role in the conversation also deserves recognition. His carefully prepared introduction and incisive questions took the discussion well beyond a straightforward presentation of the novel, opening up a broader exploration of Haenel's literary world.

After the event, Haenel took time to talk with readers, without rushing. I had the opportunity to speak with him briefly, too, about Charlie Hebdo and my work as a literary columnist. It was a short but meaningful exchange, and it reinforced my impression of a writer who is both approachable and attentive to those who come to meet him. Of course, an author's personality should never determine our assessment of their work. But meeting a writer can shed light on a book, bring its concerns into sharper focus, or suggest new ways of reading it.

That was certainly true that evening.

Enthusiasm as an Answer to Disillusionment

“The only truth is enthusiasm.” This other line from the novel could almost serve as its conclusion. But it only acquires its full meaning when read against everything Jean Deichel has to endure. The point is not to deny pain, loneliness, or the contradictions of the world. The novel confronts them with enough honesty to ensure that its enthusiasm never feels naïve.

Instead, it offers another way of living with reality. Poetry, humor, literature, and the act of passing things on become ways of preserving inner freedom, resisting disillusionment, and continuing to love. It is this deeply human outlook that gives the novel its true depth.

I loved the way the novel is put together, the pleasure of following Jean Deichel, his comic impulses and his more melancholy moments, and the poetic language that never glosses over the difficulties he faces. But above all, I loved the affection that runs through these pages: for literature, for students, for language, and for the art of passing things on.

When I left the Millepages bookstore on November 13, I felt I had experienced one of those rare suspended moments, an interlude in which literature becomes something shared. Finishing the novel gave that feeling a new resonance.

La solitude des professeurs est infinie is a deeply human novel: funny at times, sad at others, and always moving. It acknowledges the harshness of everyday life without ever giving in to it.

A novel full of love, poetry, and light, reminding us that seeing the world clearly does not mean giving up the capacity to marvel at it.

La solitude des professeurs est infinie, by Yannick Haenel
Gallimard, August 20, 2026 · 320 pages
Winner of the 2026 Prix Femina

Meeting with Yannick Haenel at the Millepages bookstore in Vincennes, Friday, November 13, 2026.

Text and photographs: Amandine Mazas

— Amandine Mazas

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