

Philosophy and parody in a murder mystery

Laurent Binet's latest novel is at once a lecture, a detective story, and an exploration of the limits of fiction.

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In Review



The Seventh Function of Language

A Novel

by Laurent Binet, translated by Sam Taylor
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

I wasn't even a page into this novel when I commented to my husband that I didn't think I was going to make it through the book. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Isn't it a novel?" I responded by reading him the opening lines:

Life is not a novel. Or at least you would like to believe so. Roland Barthes walks up Rue de Bièvre. The greatest literary critic of the twentieth century has every reason to feel anxious and upset. His mother, with whom he had a highly Proustian relationship, is dead. And his course on 'The Preparation of the Novel' at the Collège de France is such a conspicuous failure it can no longer be ignored . . .

"I see what you mean," said my husband. Yet, I kept reading, lured by the romance of reading a mystery novel that revolves around a semiologist investigating the murder of a literary critic.

The Seventh Function of Language is the second novel of Laurent Binet, who teaches French Literature at the New Sorbonne University in Paris. His first novel, *HHhH*, profiles the two men who assassinated one of Hitler's most lethal cabinet members, Reinhard Heydrich. Critics call *HHhH* both a "historical novel" and "a postmodern exploration of the limits of historical fiction." Similarly, *The Seventh Function of Language* is at once a murder mystery and a postmodern exploration of the limits of the murder mystery.

As Paris detective Jacques Bayard and semiology professor Simon Herzog investigate the suspicious death of Barthes, the history of French intellectual thought in the 1970s and '80s unfolds around them. Supporting characters—any one of whom might be the murderer, if indeed there is a murderer—include Michel Foucault, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, Bernard-Henri Lévy (better known as BHL), Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan. There are subtle conflicts, extreme sexual encounters, and philosophical rivalries. There's a rapid-fire car chase, a secret society, and a murder by stabbing with a poisoned umbrella tip. One

of the characters wonders whether he might be in a novel.

The plot thickens, as does the subplot—a narrative history of the intersections between philosophy, gender theory, literary theory, and linguistics—when the characters travel to Ithaca, New York, for a conference called “Shift into overdrive in the linguistic turn.” There they meet up with Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, John Searle, Hélène Cixous, Noam Chomsky, Camille Paglia, and a young graduate student named Judith (no surname) who bears a striking similarity to Judith Butler. Further rivalries, sexual encounters, philosophical arguments, and deaths ensue. One character continues to reflect on what it might mean that he could be a character in a novel.

It becomes increasingly clear that the characters’ motivations hinge on the secrets of language’s performative function—the power of words to create or legitimate the realities of which they speak. Judith studies “the performative function of language and suspects the patriarchal powers that be of resorting to some sneaky form of the performative in order to naturalize the cultural construction that is the model of the heteronormative monogamous couple.” She even interprets biblical narrative through her theory:

In a sense, the myth of Adam and Eve is the original performative function: from the moment it was decreed that she was created from the man’s rib, and that she committed the sin of biting into the apple, that it was all her fault, the slut, and that she fully deserved to give birth in terrible pain, she was, basically, screwed.

A bit of comic relief follows when Bayard arrives in the middle of the conversation. “‘Lesbians aren’t women, and they screw you and your phallogocentrism.’ Judith laughs. Simon laughs with her. Bayard asks: ‘What’s all this about?’”

It’s not an exaggeration to say that most of the novel reads like this. Binet melds an engaging story of French intellectual culture with the conventions of mystery fiction, both of which are inseparable from a larger philosophical point about the power of language to create reality. The book is at once a novel-length philosophy lecture, a parody of the philosophy as it unfolds, a ribald detective story, and a postmodern exploration of the limits of mystery fiction.

In the end, those who make it through the book will know which character masterminded Barthes’s death. They’ll also know about Roman Jakobson’s six

functions of language and the difference between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. Most importantly, they will have thought deeply about the performative power of language. They may even be convinced—whether out of Christian commitment to the idea of the Word made flesh or simply because performativity resonates with their experiences of the world—that reality is constructed discursively. This conviction, as Binet shows, is frightening in the power it gives people. It can also be liberating.