The French Still Obsess Over Their Gloomy Novelist of Despair

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PARIS, Sept. 9 - With its customary hype and hope, the annual French literary season known as la rentrée littéraire opened this week, with no fewer than 663 novelists elbowing for attention. Mostly in vain, it seems. To judge by the French press, Michel Houellebecq is the only writer who counts. And that was before the public had even read his latest novel, "The Possibility of an Island."

The odd thing is that this has happened before.

Mr. Houellebecq's last two novels, "The Elementary Particles" and "Platform," both later published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, also dominated their fall season, in 1998 and 2001. And they became French best sellers, at least in part by stirring intense debate and controversy, including an unsuccessful lawsuit charging the author with "incitement to discrimination, hatred and violence."

Yet his success - the Houellebecq phenomenon, as it is known here - is almost as intriguing as his writings. What does it say about France that its best-known novelist today is a kind of anticelebrity, an often-gloomy, badly dressed, chain-smoking provocateur who collects despair and filters it through a black sense of humor? Mr. Houellebecq is certainly not the cure to France's current mood of pessimism.
For the new novel, however, having paid Mr. Houellebecq (pronounced WELL-beck) a reported $1.2 million advance, his publisher, Éditions Fayard, has taken no chances. It wants succès without scandale. It also wants "The Possibility of an Island" to win the renowned Goncourt Prize. So it devised a plan.

It sent galleys to a handful of friendly critics, who signed a pledge not to reveal the novel's plot - an acerbic portrait of today's world in the guise of science fiction - until shortly before its Aug. 31 publication date. Those favored rewarded Mr. Houellebecq with splashy features and interviews intended to raise expectations and inflate sales.

Then, as Fayard may have hoped, the voluble anger of excluded critics and editors drew yet more attention to the book. "The Possibility of an Island" was promoted "like detergent," complained François Busnel, editor of Lire, a literary monthly, which was not sent the galleys. And he added: "The reader is treated like a consumer, and the journalist is the docile relay of a publicity campaign."

Still, none of this would have worked if France's chattering classes were not already obsessed by Mr. Houellebecq. To his fans, he is the fresh air that French literature has long awaited, the first author in years to address the existentialist crisis of modern society. To his foes, he is a misogynist, racist and blasphemer who views the world through his depressive personality.

What he describes as his "gift for provocation," however, continues to bear fruit: five books about him have been published here this fall, one hagiography by his friend, the Spanish writer Fernando Arrabal, but the others less friendly, among them Jean-François Patricola's aptly titled "Houellebecq, or the Permanent Provocation" and Eric Naulleau's "Help! Houellebecq Is Back," itself already a nonfiction best seller.

Denis Demonpion's "Houellebecq Unauthorized" in turn argues that the novelist, once a computer programmer, has reprogrammed his life, not only by changing his name from Michel Thomas (Houellebecq was his maternal grandfather's surname) and altering his birth date from 1956 to 1958 (making him 47 instead of 49), but also by claiming that his mother is dead (while they are estranged, she lives on the island of Réunion).

Eager to find the key to Mr. Houellebecq's writing, Mr. Demonpion looks at the writer's biography - his upbringing by his paternal grandparents, his training as an agronomist, his dream of becoming a filmmaker, his early poetry and his first novel, "Whatever." Then come the scandals surrounding Mr. Houellebecq's second and third novels, including the lawsuit that followed his published remark that "Islam is the most stupid religion."

The central question, though, is less whether his novels are autobiographical than whether their narrators' opinions are also Mr. Houellebecq's. And here there are frequent
coincidences, notably their common view that Western society is rotten to the core. In "The Elementary Particles," where one of two main characters is named Michel, Mr. Houellebecq blames this state of affairs on the 1968 baby boomer generation and its political correctness gone awry.