

Double standards

What if an event happens not once, but twice?

HENRIETTE KORTHALS ALTES

L'ANOMALIE
HERVÉ LE TELLIER
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A MATHEMATICIAN BY TRAINING and an Oulipian writer by trade, Hervé Le Tellier enjoys playing with numbers as much as with words. In one of his early short stories, a man reordering his bookshelves finds that all titular numbers have gone awry. *The Three Musketeers* have become *The Four Musketeers*, with an unsavoury supernumerary called Goliath added to the trio. And this variation brings many more puzzling results: Antoinette Fouque's feminist classic becomes *There are three sexes*; historical confusion spreads with books on the *Fourth Reich* and the *Third World War*; Freud's *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* counts an additional one on paranoia, of course.

In his new offering, *L'Anomalie*, which has just won the Prix Goncourt, Le Tellier applies the classic

Oulipian plus-one permutation to a striking thought experiment: what if an event happens not once, but twice? To preserve readerly pleasure, this narrative ploy is only revealed halfway through, as the novel sets out following a dozen characters whose journeys cross when on March 10, 2021 they happen to be on the same Paris-New York flight, caught in unmapped cumulonimbus with massive air pockets. The pilot in command, David Markle, has never experienced any turbulence that dramatic but, miraculously, they come out unscathed. Among the passengers we meet is Blake the professional hitman, *en route* to a mission, who otherwise leads a perfectly respectable family life. Another, Victor Miesel, is a minor writer, the author of *Des échecs qui ont ratés* (Screwed-up failures) and translator of *Waiting for Godot* into

Klingon, about to pick up a translation prize. Profoundly shaken by this near-death experience, he sets out to write a novel, *L'Anomalie*, his final piece of melancholy meditation before he puts an end to his own life. There is also the precocious Sophia Kleffman. She displays an encyclopaedic knowledge of amphibians and suppresses a dark secret about her father, a veteran of the Iraq war. Joanna Woods, a successful Black American lawyer (for a Big Pharma company) with activist ambitions, has just fallen in love and is pregnant, while Lucie, a Parisian film editor, struggles to stay in love with her ageing partner, the architect André. These characters' destinies are braided into one another and unfold like serial subplots, each ending on a note of suspense, which makes the novel - or novels, in a nod to Perec's *Life*:



A user's manual - a page-turner.

However, on June 24, 2021, the exact same Air France flight with exactly the same crew and passengers emerges from the exact same storm again. This time it is intercepted by the FBI and NSA, as mandated by protocol 42, a hoax dreamt up by Adrian Miller, now Princeton Professor of Probability, who back in his postgraduate days had been commissioned to write a report on crisis logistics post-9/11. Twenty years later, he is called in by FBI dignitaries and the Chief of Psychological Operations, who are under pressure to make sense of what is no less than an international crisis. Miller is summoned to give a coherent scientific narrative of sorts, and calls on Nick Bostrom's (real) theories of simulation and bio-copying, on particles and black holes, quantum physics and time loops. Donald Trump makes a cameo appearance, here, as a grouper fish with a blond wig ("un gros mérrou à perruque blonde") who is only responsive when he hears about a rumoured fatwa against Mickey Mouse. He agonizes over having to inform his counterparts, Xi Jinping and an arrogant Emmanuel Macron.

The aberrant event throws up pressing scientific, philosophical, ethical and religious questions. An interfaith meeting is held, involving several religious

luminaries, to discuss origin myths and whether a flight that appears out of nowhere is blasphemous. Hypocrisy masquerades as international diplomacy, surveillance as psychological support and cultural inclusiveness, and science fiction as scientific truth. Le Tellier delivers some sharp social comedy here, via a parody of American action movies in which ballets of helicopters land at the White House - only to bring in tipsy mathematicians.

But behind the comedy are more profound psychological questions about individual freedom and what to do with the 243 supernumerary passengers. Under the surveillance of an army of FBI psychologists, the doubles meet. Le Tellier, however, avoids the age-old *doppelgänger* themes of the uncanny and the repressed unconscious dear to the Romantics; instead, these encounters explore how each character might really face a double with whom they share identity, memories, love and family. One of Le Tellier's epigraphs, quoted from Miesel's *L'Anomalie* - "l'existence précède l'essence, et de pas mal en plus" ("existence precedes essence, and by quite a long way, too") - pitches the mock-existential question differently. What is essential and what are we willing to compromise? Duplication brings up all sorts of practical questions: can children, a loved

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one, a pension scheme, or celebrity be shared? How do we relate to time and counterfactuals, regrets, remorse and second chances? Miesel, the writer, is uniquely placed, as his double is dead and the success of *L'Anomalie* has propelled him back to public life. So the last lines of his *L'Anomalie* - "je ne mets pas fin à mes jours, je donne vie à de l'immortalité" ("I'm not ending my days, I'm giving life to immortality") - ring strangely true, for his own suicide fails. And while the doubles fight, kill or welcome each other as happy twins, theories about what happened - ranging from simulation, post-human programming and obscure particle physics - rage and die on the internet and all over social media.

Le Tellier gently mocks a generation desperately in quest of theories (and protocols) to abide by and incapable of endorsing personal freedom. With his virtuoso erudition and references to fiction and history alike, he dismisses them all with delightful playfulness. Perhaps, like one of his characters who writes that love saves us from constantly looking for meaning in life, he is more of a romantic than he would admit. And if we agree with Proust that a work of art in which there are theories is like an object that still carries a price tag, then surely *L'Anomalie* is priceless. ■