

Encounter with an American Writer in Jacques AMYOT

During the Caractères Festival, our class met with an American author: Eric PUCHNER.

Caractères, International Book Festival, takes place every year in May at Saint-Germain Abbey. This year, writers from around the whole world were invited to spend the weekend in Auxerre to share their taste for literature with nearly 2,000 people. Some students also had the opportunity to meet American authors because when the festival started it was in the morning on the 19th in several high schools: Pierre Larousse in Toucy, Vauban, Fourier and Jacques-Amyot in Auxerre.

Our class (1ère 4) had the great pleasure of meeting Eric Puchner, the author of 'Model Home'. With Mrs Baës, our English teacher, we studied "Mission", one of the short stories from the collection entitled 'Music through the floor'.

We met Eric Puchner in a classroom decorated just like the classroom of his short story. When he arrived, some of our classmates acted the opening scene of "Mission" which they had rehearsed with Mrs Millot. In fact it was the first time he saw one of his scenes being staged. We also had the opportunity to ask him some questions we had

prepared in class with our teacher. The first ones were more personal like the city he lived in, his family, his hobbies. Then, he told us how he ended up being a teacher and a writer at the same time. First, Eric Puchner studied English literature and creative writing. Then, he became a university teacher and worked for a while in the Mission district in San Francisco where a lot of immigrants live, just like Nils, the main character of the novel we studied. That's how we finally found out : yes it is an autobiographical novel. He was inspired by his former students: some didn't want to learn, others wanted to teach him things he didn't know. That led us to ask him the

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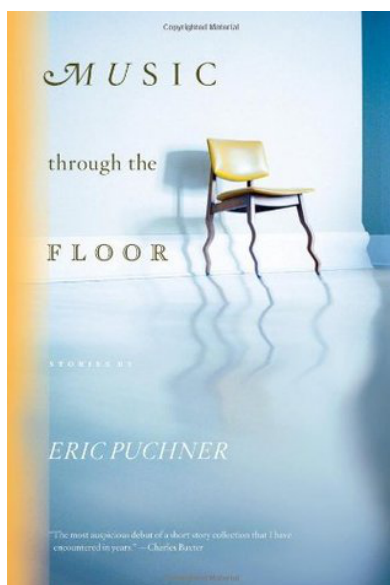


p1→question we were all wondering about “Is Lorena Poot the main character of the short story?” And of course, he answered it using a literary example: The Great Gatsby, comparing Lorena to Jay Gatsby and Nils to Nick Carraway. A huge fan of France, never getting bored of looking at its landscapes, Eric Puchner is also a big admirer of French literature. Madame Bovary by Flaubert is his favourite French book. He also told us - with his ever-present sense of humour - about his attempt to read a book by Houellebecq, which ended up being a failure.

« I was on fire »

Reacted Puchner when we evocated the writting of his first short storie

Then, we started talking about his literary career. It’s at the age of 9, when he discovered a Ray Bradbury’s science fiction book, that he realized he wanted to write. « *I wanted to do that* ».



To this day, he is not a full-time writer, he also teaches at a university. When we got to the question of his writing job and the time that he takes to write, he said that his first short story was finished in a couple of hours, adding with humour « *I was on fire* ». Nevertheless, that only happened once. He generally needs months, or a whole year for « *Mission* ». Only one person is permitted to read the finished work: his wife. Puchner added that his favourite subject is family. He finds it fascinating that people end up with other people only through coincidence; he compares that to a « *giant blind date* ».

Author of two collections of short stories, Puchner bears a special love for this literary form. It’s the first type of literature he ever read and he thinks short stories give a unique aspect to his writing. However, he doesn’t want to publish short stories with an educational aim or moral, he just wants to describe problems without solving them; this is what happened in « *Mission* », a political story.

We couldn’t meet an American artist without asking him the million dollar question: « does the American Dream still exist? ». The response of the author of Model Home was short but clear: according to him, « *it’s a myth, it never existed* ». We then asked him about the American election. He explained that he was



traumatized by Donald Trump’s arrival at the White House, however he now feels energized by all the protests of the American people, « *we’re gonna survive* » he added.

To wind up this interview, we asked Eric Puchner a bit more about his last collection of short Stories, Last Day on Earth, which is not available in French yet. This book is mainly about families, like his other stories, and parenthood.

This was a really interesting meeting led by a friendly, direct and unassuming author who never lost his typical touch of humour. This was a thrilling cultural exchange which ended up with everybody gathering over drinks and nibbles. ■

— Lou Ann Campenon
Oriane Sanoner