



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## Sébastien Doubinsky in conversation with Isabelle Petiot

*Sébastien Doubinsky is a bilingual French writer and academic, born in Paris in 1963. He has been widely published in French and in English. In France, *Quién es?* and *La Trilogie Babylonienne* were published by Joelle Losfeld. *The Song of Synth* and *White City* were published this year in the United States, respectively by Talos/Skyhorse and Bizarro Pulp Fiction/JournalStone. Doubinsky currently lives in Denmark, where he teaches French literature, culture and history at the French department of Aarhus University.*

**Isabelle Petiot (IP):** Sébastien, you write in French and English, and you live in Denmark. I can add other complications to this: Russian surname, Jewish and Catholic backgrounds, radical politics, etc. So the first question is this: How do you see yourself as a writer?

**Sébastien Doubinsky (SD):** It hard to say, because I don't see myself as a writer. What I mean by this is that all these identities you have enumerated are all me, just as being a writer, an academic, a husband and a father are also me. I do not see the writer part as being a separate entity, but one of the many sides of the same person that I can call 'myself'. One could maybe say that the writing part of me is the part where all the other entities meet and melt, becoming the dynamics of my writing. In a way, it is a latent aspect which becomes activated through all the other parts. I am very wary of the notions of 'writer', 'artist' and so on. It is the same thing as 'teacher', 'policeman' or 'nurse'. It is a social function, but

**individuals cannot be reduced to this simple tag, although many wish they could – both ways. I write, I am lucky to be published, but I am not a writer. I am just a novelist and a poet, like I'm Jewish, Catholic and French with an American childhood ...**

IP: You write poetry, stories, novels, essays etc. What, if any, is your favourite genre? If you do not have favourites, what is it that impels you to write a particular text in a particular form? How do you know?

**SD: I started to write poetry when I was quite young, then I wrote a few short stories and finally ended as a novelist, which I think is a pretty classical progression. I have, however, no favourite form, as they are all necessary to me in their differences. And to answer the last part of your question, I would say that I never know – the form imposes itself on me. I don't have any choice, really. The form comes naturally. Poetry is like a notebook – I work with short forms, a little bit like Kerouac's poetic notes. I call them non-haikus and they try to reflect my moods, thoughts and visions. Prose is a much longer process – it is, after all, a construction. I often start with one idea and it keeps bugging me and bugging me until I have to do something about it. It can take years for a novel to take form. What I have to choose, though, is the language. And that is more mysterious. Each work calls its own language, but it is impossible to explain why – the music perhaps, the rhythm ... The way they combine with the topic. That's a rational explanation. I'm sure they are a lot of subconscious ones. But I can't really explain it.**

IP: As a creative writer who is also an academic and a critic, and who has co-written *Reading Literature Today* with Tabish Khair, do you have a particular definition of literature?

**SD: No, I actually don't. Generally what we call 'literature' is associated with a value, which is problematic for me. If I can accept personal value and taste, I have much more problems when those are applied as general norms. I will never despise *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *The Da Vinci Code*, which are regularly frowned upon by the critics, because they are also part of literature, i.e. 'what can be read'. So, to me, literature is a huge space, in which we find works which we have affinities and in which we find a relevance. The rest is politics and only politics. Bourdieu pointed out how much the canons are created to maintain the power of a ruling class. 'Literature', in the aristocratic sense, is meant to perpetuate this. I definitely think we can teach literature without this prejudice. Baudelaire's definition of a 'modern' masterpiece was the fact that it still surprised us. I think that is the best definition ever given. And a lot of books can suddenly become quality literature. Much more than any 'canon' can contain.**

IP: Some of your best critical successes as a fiction writer have been novels and novellas that would probably be called 'fantasy fiction'. Now, we know that the description, 'fantasy fiction', today means Tolkien and Rowling to most readers. How do you deal with being inserted into such a popular generic tradition, especially as you seem to write against it? What do you think of 'fantasy fiction' in general?

**SD: I actually do not write Fantasy, but I have been associated with another genre called 'New Weird', which contains huge names such as Jeff Vandermeer and China Miéville. My work is also more on the dystopian side of Weird, with (humble) echoes of Aldous Huxley,**

Sébastien Doubinsky in Conversation with Isabelle Petiot.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 3 no. 1, February 2016.  
[http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers\\_in\\_conversation/](http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/)

**Philip K. Dick and George Orwell. But I see your question and it is true that I am against genre definitions. To me they are only useful for librarians and book-sellers – and I do not mean that in a condescending way at all. The problem with genre is that it is linked with a biological terminology, and that since Auschwitz, I am allergic to biological references in culture. That is why I fight so much against it. But to go back to your question, I think fantasy, weird, bizarre fictions all serve the same purpose, which is not to make you ‘evade’ this world, but, on the contrary, make you much more aware of its limits. It is a necessary game, vital even, which enables you to deal with reality. It is, actually, quite a violent game, in which reality always loses. To be born again, of course, but slightly modified. At least, in its apprehension. And this is vital for our freedom of thought.**

IP: Your fiction is very aware of contemporary politics. How do you see the relationship between fiction and politics?

**SD: Well, politics are a fiction. They just don’t sell it like that. That’s the difference. But all literature is political. Poetry, prose, theatre, they are all aimed at reality and in this way they are extremely political and extremely dangerous. Even the kids’ comics. They offer a resistance, a way out of reality that is radical. That’s why some people love to dress up and do Cosplay: they want fiction to be real. It may seem ridiculous to many, but it is actually the very essence of rebellion.**

IP: In *Les Fantômes du Soir*, published in 2008 in *Le Cherche-Midi*, the main protagonist, a rather unsuccessful writer, is being paid a visit by the ‘ghosts’ of three legendary authors, Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell and Blaise Cendrars. Apart from the fact that these three characters seem to love ‘partying’ in your novel, what made you think that they could co-exist in the same work of fiction – or decided you to put them in the same work of fiction?

**SD: I put them in my novel because Durrell and Cendrars were both friends of Henry Miller, and that gave a formidable trio. They were also extremely dedicated writers, who dealt a lot with the notion of ‘vitalisme’, that is to say the unquenchable lust for life, an idea I have always been very attracted to. Considering the rather melancholic situation of my main character, who is on the contrary attracted by suicide, they form a perfect counterpoint.**

IP: So, are these three your favourite all-time writers? If yes, tell us why? If not, tell us who are your three favourite all-time writers and why?

**SD: They are definitely among my huge pantheon of favourite writers. I wrote my PhD on Blaise Cendrars, and am in awe of Durrell and Miller. But there are many, many writers in my pantheon. I am a radical polytheist when it comes to literature! But to name some anyway, I would also put Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Orwell, Yevgeny Zamyatin and Huxley as top figures, because of the freshness of their style (Kerouac), their radicality (Burroughs, Zamyatin) and their political views (Orwell, Huxley). But that’s just a few of them. I have a very, very long list!**

IP: In the same novel, set in Paris, one of your characters, Cendrars, declares: ‘that’s funny when you come to think of it, the last thing that changes in big cities are the parks’ (86). I know

you have received a degree in history, can you tell us how important it is for you to give your readers the possibility of grasping the past through your works of fiction?

**SD: The past – or what we call the past – is an interesting construction. My maternal grandfather, who was an archaeologist and art historian, told me that ancient history was made of ten percent excavations and ninety percent fiction. That’s what I love about the past. It’s real – things happened – but it’s also a fiction – because we don’t really know or remember how or why they happened. It is the best material for a writer. When I worked with Billy the Kid’s character in *Quién es?*, I used him because there is so little known about him. It was perfect. I could follow real events, but at the same time give them the angle I desired. And who knows? Maybe my Billy is closer to the real one than we can imagine ...**

IP: Which reminds me: Billy the Kid, a quintessential American Western legend in a French novella? There seem to be so many American connections in your work ...

**SB: Well, I lived in the States when I was a kid, from 1966 to 1968. It was my *âge d’or*. Only good, idealised memories, and this explains why I love old American cars. But seriously, English was actually my first articulate language, and as my father worked for American universities, American culture is a huge part of my culture. What’s more, I discovered Burroughs, Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and the Beats in my aunt’s bookshelves when I was 12 ... I remember reading *Nova Express* and thinking: ‘I don’t understand anything, but this is incredible ...’ So yes, America is central to my work – but I would say, ‘my’ America – which is a Frankenstein monster created with memories, music, art and literary fragments ... Quite a colourful monster, actually!**

IP: Finally, what are you working on now, and are there specific books we should look out for in 2016? Tell us a bit about them.

**SB: I have three novels coming out in the States in 2016. First, *Omega Gray*, coming out in February through Bizarro Pulp Press, which is a Zombie story in reverse: here, the living are invading the land of the dead, through real estate. It is a dark farce, which tries to point out some basic depressing Western Culture traits in history. Then there is *Suan Ming*, coming out through Villipede Publications later in 2016, which is a novel exploring what we call reality, and its alternate possibilities. It is more of a Science-Fiction novel, with a Dickian twist and homage. Finally, I am very honoured that the Dalkey Archive Press will be publishing my *Absinth* in November 2016, which is a novel about the Apocalypse fizzling out like a wet firecracker. Pretty *à propos* in the times we are living, I must say.**

---

*Isabelle Petiot teaches French language and literature at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her areas of interest include recent Francophone writing and postcolonial literature. She has taught in France, USA and the Caribbean in the past, and she also translates from English to French. Her latest translation was a story by the Indian writer, Tabish Khair, in D'amour & de guerre, (2014) published at Lettres du Monde & Elytis, Bordeaux.*