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# Barbara Henning

## Thursday, September 04, 2008

### Dominique Fabre's *The Waitress Was New*

This week I read Dominique Fabre's novella, *The Waitress Was New* (Archipelago Books, 2008, Jordan Stump, trans.)

I like holding this book, 117 pages, paperback, 5 by 6 inches, just a little bigger than a pocket book. I feel as if I am carrying around something personal, a little bit of Pierre the waiter-barman at Le Cercle Cafe in Paris. I put him under my pillow for a few nights. The title leads me to think at first that the narrative will be about the new waitress who appears in the first sentence, but then I discover that she is incidental to this story. She replaces the regular waitress as a temporary worker and then as the days go on, the owner disappears leaving Pierre and the cook to deal with the owner's wife and a cafe in need of supplies and the owner, and then the new waitress leaves too. The events are not as important here as the tone and continuity of these rather "incidental" characters. Pierre has worked here for years and the regulars have come in regularly. Then the owner has a new affair and he disappears. Nonetheless, Pierre seems to accept whatever comes next. He consoles the wife and accompanies her as she anxiously wonders about her husband and his infidelity. Pierre has no lovers now. He goes home alone and we are alone with him. And then the wife disappears too. No one is thinking about Pierre and the cook Amedee or the regulars. Just buy a cafe somewhere else and let them go where they will. Pierre is reading Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*. He admires Levi and his courage. Pierre looks around, and then goes home to figure out his retirement. He hadn't thought about it before. And now when he counts his paychecks, he discovers that after many years he must find another position. There is something delicate and beautiful about Pierre's resignation.

It doesn't really matter what happens in the novel. What I like most is the intimate catalogue of Pierre's daily life, the thoughts he records as he observes the drama of the lives of those in the cafe and then at night as he withdraws to his own apartment. I put his book under my pillow when I go to sleep. The book is like a window into the community of people in this neighborhood and into Pierre's internal life. As a writer I am attracted to this type of intimate casual voice, seeming like text clipped right out of a life. I'm looking forward to reading other novels by Fabre as they are translated.

Here's an early paragraph--

"The new girl was already setting tables back in the dining room. There's nobody here in the morning but the kids from the high school, usually just two or three of them, this is where they come to skip class They don't

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always have enough cash for a Coke, or even a coffee. I'm well known

around here, they call me by my first name, I can't always keep them straight but generally it's a pleasure to see them. We also get people waiting for a phone call to set their course for the day, and housewives from the villas behind the train station, they come in together for a cup of coffee before the head off to the shops. He gave a big sigh and asked what he owed. Without my noticing, the boss had left by the back door, next to the old dumbwaiter from before they renovated the cafe. Sometimes he uses the front door like every-one else, but now and then he slips out on the sly. They live above Le Cercle." (14)

Labels: **Archipelago Books, Dominique Fabre, The Waitress Was New**

*posted by Barbara Henning @ 9:34 PM*



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