

THE BEGINNING OF ÉDOUARD LOUIS

The Making of a Transnational Best-Seller

Sophie Noël

The 2000s saw the emergence, in France, of a literary phenomenon situated at the crossroads of autobiographical narrative and sociological testimony, the narrative of *transfuge de classe* depicting the author's often painful upward social mobility. This type of work enjoyed an important success since the publication of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* [Returning to Reims] in 2009, which sold nearly 100,000 copies, and of Édouard Louis' first book *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* [The End of Eddy], in 2014. A "surprise" critical and commercial success from a young, unknown 21 years old author, the book sold more than 200,000 copies in just a few months in France and has been translated into more than 30 languages.¹

While this type of work can be linked to numerous literary antecedents, particularly coming-of-age narratives and the

figure of the "school miracle" in the 19th century (Meizoz, 2025), the movement has taken on a distinctive character in France, leading to numerous publications enriching the spectrum of stories of *transfuges de classe* or auto-socio-biographies (Lammers and Twellmann, 2021), while also resonating abroad. These narratives of social ascension, whether anonymous or written by notable figures in the cultural and economic world, whether they take the form of literary autofiction, testimony, interview, sociological essay, or even comic strip, have thus been labelled as a "literary trademark" (Abiven and Véron, 2025, citing Thérenty and Wrona, 2020) or a "media and publishing brand" (Fringant, 2026). The Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Annie Ernaux in 2022 further strengthened the phenomenon due to the importance of the theme of social revenge in her work.

Rapid buzz for an author or a genre of writing is nonetheless a commonplace phenomenon in the history of publishing, each commercial success prompting numerous imitations and variations among competing publishers, regardless of the sector. The phenomenal success of Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* in 1954, published by Julliard, is a well-known precedent in literature. More recently, the graphic novel provides a good illustration of this "reappro-

¹ The book, across all editions, has sold more than 400,000 copies in France (according to the

publisher) and several hundred thousand copies worldwide.

privation” in the comics industry (Menu, 2005), as well as the social critique essay in trade publishing (Noël, 2021). Thus the aim here is less to revisit the phenomenon of *transfuges de classe* narratives, which has been extensively commented upon and analyzed (notably by Abiven and Véron, 2024 and 2025), than to use the dazzling success of Édouard Louis, author of seven books to date with the same publisher, to reflect on certain recent transformations to the French publishing field and within a general-interest publishing house such as Le Seuil.² Described by its main protagonists as a true “editorial miracle,” the success of *The End of Eddy* merits analysis insofar as it illustrates the effectiveness of the mechanisms which produce belief in the publishing field (Bourdieu, 1992), but also the entanglement of market and symbolic logics within a publishing house occupying a unique place in French literary and intellectual history. Founded in 1935, and derived from Christian humanism, Éditions du Seuil acquired an important position in the 1960s and 70s in literature (with Césaire, Glissant, Böll, Grass, etc.) and in the social sciences, notably around structuralism with authors such as Barthes, Lacan, Chomsky, and Genette (on the history of the publishing house, see Serry, 2008).

The construction of a “surprise” success

As is often the case in the “golden legends” that punctuate the history of publishing, Édouard Louis' manuscript was initially rejected by every publisher. This first-person narrative of a young gay man's painful childhood in the Picard countryside nevertheless found a favourable audience in René de Ceccatty, a writer, translator from Italian and Japanese (Pasolini, Moravia, Abe...), and series editor at Seuil: “I read the first ten pages thinking it was a very well written pastiche of the 19th-century world. But really, sincerely, that's what I thought [...] and I understood, obviously, as I read further, that it's a completely autobiographical text. I remember, it was a Monday, and that same evening, I called him.” He presented the manuscript to the Seuil reading committee as “utterly extraordinary.” The head of the foreign rights department was also enthusiastic upon reading the manuscript, which she sent to a large number of foreign publishing houses. In her pitch, she emphasised the author's original style, which blended different registers of language, and his connection to Pierre Bourdieu “in order to tone down the manuscript's ‘overly French’ feel” and “so that the focus doesn't dwell too much on

² We rely here on interviews carried out in 2026 with his editor, the two successive heads of

foreign rights at Éditions du Seuil, as well as with his literary agent in London.

homosexuality, which doesn't sell well abroad." If publishing an unknown author always represents a risk for a publisher, only sales or exceptional circumstances could justify the transfer of rights at this stage, and the "Bourdieu argument" would prove essential in launching the bidding process abroad.

The book was published in January 2014 in Seuil's prestigious literary series, "Le Cadre rouge." The initial printing of 2,000 copies was prudent: it was a debut novel, and the sales department, monopolized by launching a title from an author who had received a significant advance on royalties, wasn't particularly attentive to its release. This first printing nonetheless sold out very quickly, and reprints followed, with the book topping the weekly bestseller lists, ahead of mass-market titles with substantial promotional budgets like E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The book's media reception played an important role in this rapid growth. The head of press at Seuil was also part of the "web of collective belief" (Thompson, 2010) that contributed to building the symbolic value of this first book. She meticulously prepared its release, predicting that it would be "an unimaginable hit." The vast majority of critics (*Le Parisien*, *Le Nouvel Obs*, *Marianne*, *Le Monde*, *L'Express*, *La Croix*, the program "La grande librairie" on France 5 television channel...), with

only a few dissenting voices³, hailed a "literary revelation" at a moment when controversies over same-sex marriage dominated the media landscape, making the issue of homophobia sensitive. The symbolic capital attached to a publishing house like Seuil was clearly a factor in this "incredible press," as were Édouard Louis' contacts in the intellectual and journalistic world through Didier Éribon and the sociologist Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, with whom he is close. The fact that Édouard Louis had been, before the publication of his first book, employed by the bookstore of the Théâtre de l'Odéon, and then at Cahiers de Colette, a Parisian bookstore run by Colette Kerber, must undoubtedly also be considered. The rights manager forwarded this rave press to her address book of foreign publishers, permitting her to secure six rights sales just three months after the book's release, notably in Germany with Fischer Verlag, a house with a prestigious literary catalogue, in Italy (Bompiani), in Spain (Salamandra), and in Brazil (Tusquets/Planeta). Around thirty sales followed, in Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, the Mediterranean basin, Asia, and Latin America. The author's trip in October 2014 to the Frankfurt International Book Fair, which occupies a central role in accessing global publishing circuits (Serry and Vincent, 2013), accelerated the process and led to

³ Notably David Beliard in *Libération*, March 2nd, 2014.

significant bidding for the title. As John Thompson (2010, p. 208) notes, the role of auctions is as symbolic as it is economic in the publishing world: they constitute a signal that strengthens belief in the value of the work in question.

A powerful literary agency

The role played by literary criticism in the recognition and success of Édouard Louis, as well as his rapid accession to the transnational rights circuit, is thus central, as evidenced by his decision, after this first success, to be represented by The Wylie Agency – the famed American agency – for the management of his foreign rights.

The agency, founded by Andrew Wylie in New York in 1980, is famous for having established a new balance of power between authors and publishers, favouring the first. Nicknamed “the Jackal” due to the brutality of his methods, Wylie is known as “the agent of Nobel Prizes” because of the number of prestigious authors who have entrusted him with the management of their rights. René de Ceccatty explains this choice, unusual for a young author in France, by the fact that “very quickly, there were requests that we were not used to handling. That is

to say, requests from universities, movies, television series, and theatres.” While this type of “all-out” strategy might evoke the more commercial end of the field, where transmedia adaptations are the rule in the case of success, it was accompanied by markers that are more typical of the literary and intellectual sphere. One could mention the numerous stage adaptations of several of Édouard Louis' texts, in the wake of Eribon's *Retour à Reims* [Returning to Reims], which helped to inscribe the author within the artistic and intellectual sphere⁴, as well as the requests from universities for courses and conferences, particularly in the United States, which made him “a public intellectual whose voice is sought after,” as his agent explains.

Édouard Louis is also known for his high standards when it comes to the editing of his texts, as attested by the 4 to 5 proofs preceding their publication, due to his frequent corrections (his editor speaks of “remorse, not whims”), a costly practice for the publisher. Likewise, he is involved in the choice of his translators abroad. *The End of Eddy*, for example, was translated three times into Italian. His agent describes him as someone “who makes decisions, who has a vision.” And if he is involved in promoting his works, it is to better control their

⁴ Among the many theatrical adaptations of Édouard Louis in France and abroad, we should quote *Histoire de la Violence* [History of

Violence], his second work, directed by Stanislas Nordey at the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris and by Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne in Berlin in 2018.

content: “He doesn't want any vulgarity at all [...]. We don't place any advertisement without submitting it to him,” emphasizes René de Ceccatty, who also mentions his interest in the choice of covers for the paperback editions of his titles. The account he gives of his first meeting with the agent from the Wylie Agency, who came to Paris to sign Édouard Louis' representation contract, illustrates well the tension between contradictory imperatives, with the editor positioning himself as a bulwark against the commercial logic pushed by the Anglo-Saxon agent: “The first thing he said was: ‘we need to see what your promotional campaign plan is.’ And then I said: ‘listen, you've got bad timing, because the first thing Édouard demanded was above all that we not display any posters for his book.’”

Homology of positions

Édouard Louis appears therefore as an author perfectly suited to his publisher, Le Seuil: the denunciation of the logics of domination and social violence in his works mirrors the intellectual and political engagement of a house that occupied an important place in the post-war literary and intellectual field, committed against the Algerian War and colonialism, and Bourdieu's publisher

since the early 1990s. A closeness confirmed by René de Ceccatty, for whom “Édouard corresponds to a certain aesthetics and politics of Seuil [...]. He is very attached to Seuil. For him, it makes sense.” His success can also be read through the house's adaptation to a new state of the publishing field. The acquisition of Seuil by La Martinière in 2004, then by Média-Participations, the third largest French publishing group,⁵ in 2017, accelerated the shift: the importance of the commercial promotion of titles, the role of press officers in the construction of success (Naudier, 2011; Donnart, 2022), but also the emphasis on the personality of the author, who “plays” well in the media because of his youth (“He fascinates, he has a sort of aura”, as his editor comments). We can also mention the growing role of literary agents in France (Leperlier and Sapiro, 2021) who, without severing the privileged relationship between authors and their editors, a “traditional” model that persists in France and constitutes an essential link in the system, ensure the multiplication of foreign rights contracts, while also managing subsidiary rights, thus assuring them an unprecedented presence in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Asia.

To a certain extent, Édouard Louis seems to combine the characteristics of “quality

⁵ Média-Participations, which achieved a turnover of 700 million euros in 2025, occupies an important place in the comics and illustrated

book sector (with imprints such as Dargaud, Dupuis, Le Lombard).

bestsellers” (Pouly, 2016): “easy to read” literary narratives that combine symbolic and economic capital, without, however, attaining the stratospheric sales of globally commercial best-sellers like J.K. Rowling or Freida McFadden. If national receptions are, according to his agent, extremely diverse, they find their point of convergence in the “universal” theme of exclusion, which lends itself to differentiated and more or less politicized readings, depending on national context. This type of hybrid literary genre allows Louis’ publisher to reap critical and commercial profits, without endangering its image as a “quality” publishing house embodying literary, intellectual, and political values. The fact that this first book, like the author’s subsequent works, has enjoyed long-lasting and steady sales even after its release in paperback is, in this respect, remarkable. One cannot help but see a possible illustration of the phenomenon described by Pierre Bourdieu (1999): “Some commercial publishers can therefore try to reconcile strategies that in another, more autonomous state of the literary field, were irreconcilable: investment, necessarily long term, in lasting authors and the search for commercial success in quick turnaround literary production.” Seuil’s desire to “carry the voices of all those who shed light on how we live” while remaining “consistent with our values,” according to the current head of foreign rights, seems perfectly aligned with this trend.

One illustration of this is the 2025 publication of blogger Rose Lamy’s essay, *Ascendant beauf*, in Seuil’s “documents” series, which found great success (20,000 copies sold in a few months). A denunciation of cultural domination, presented in a much more accessible style, it was like an offshoot of Édouard Louis’ auto-socioanalyses and the phenomenon of *transfuge de classe*, allowing it to reach different and larger fractions of the public.

References

- Abiven, K. and Véron, L. (2024) *Trahir et venger : paradoxes des récits de transfuges de classe*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Abiven, K. and Véron, L. (2025) “Du transfuge de classe au *class defector* : définition, histoire et circulation d’un motif narratif contemporain”, *COntEXTES* [Online], 36.
- Bourdieu, P. (1992) *Les Règles de l’art*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Bourdieu, P. (1999) “Une révolution conservatrice dans l’édition”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 126-127, pp. 3-28.
- Bourdieu, P. (2008) “A conservative revolution in publishing”, *Translation Studies*, 1-2, pp. 123-153.
- Donnart, L. (2024) “Produire la valeur symbolique d’une œuvre : ethnographie du travail des attachées de presse au sein

d'une maison d'édition parisienne", master thesis, EHESS.

-Fringant, M. (2026) "Des transfuges de classe au transclasse. Réflexions sociologiques à propos des usages sociaux d'une création lexicale", *Zilsel*, 16, pp. 302-325.

-Lammers, P. and Twellmann, M. (2021) "L'autosociobiographie, une forme itinérante", *COntEXTES* [Online], 36.

-Leperlier, T. and Sapiro, G. (2021) "Les agents de la globalisation éditoriale. Stratégies de conquête et de résistance", *Réseaux*, 226-227, pp. 127-153.

-Meizoz, J. (2025) "Genèse des récits de transfuges de classe", *COntEXTES* [Online], 36. Menu, J.-C. (2005) *Plates-bandes*. Paris: L'Association.

-Naudier, D. (2011) "Orchestrer la visibilité des écrivaines et des écrivains en France : le 'capital réputationnel' des attachées de presse", *Recherches féministes*, 24, pp. 175-191.

-Noël, S. (2021) *L'édition indépendante critique. Engagements politiques et intellectuels*. Villeurbanne: Presses de l'Enssib.

-Pouly, M.-P. (2016) "Playing both sides of the field: The anatomy of a 'quality' bestseller", *Poetics*, 59, pp. 20-34.

-Sapiro, G. (2009) *Les contradictions de la globalisation éditoriale*. Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions.

-Serry, H. (2008) *Les Éditions du Seuil. 70 ans d'histoires*. Paris: Le Seuil/IMEC.

-Serry, H. and Vincent, J. (2013) "Penser le rôle des foires internationales dans la mondialisation de l'édition", *Le Mouvement social*, 243, pp. 105-116.

-Thérenty, M.-E. and Wrona A. (eds.) (2020), *L'Écrivain comme marque*. Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne.

-Thompson, J. (2010) *Merchants of culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.