

In fact, AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE has the structure of a modern fairy tale...

I think it is pretty realistic. Although, like fairy tales, it has an emotional structure. Like a fairy tale, it is transparent and seems simple. And as in fairy tales, the characters are compelled to choose, to take decisions of a moral nature. But the real heart of the book is in what Stendhal called "the movements of the soul, which first of all are so difficult to detect and then so difficult to express with precision and without exaggeration or timidity". For example, the mistress of Kevin Hardwick, the magnate of the chemical industry, shows him the evidence of his wife's infidelity. He tells her, "If you had loved me, you would never have shown me this". That's the kind of effects I go after.

Your novels are characterized by: realistic technique and metaphorical intention. And, besides, a considerable amount of research.

As to research, yes, I visited the archives and libraries and galleries that Mark goes to, and I lived for a time in Rome, Paris (in the same apartment on the Ile Saint-Louis that I describe in the novel), Cannes, Toledo, New York, the "island of the very rich" where Mark and Marianne meet, etc. And of course I read a lot. But in the end I threw out 90 percent of my descriptions, above all the facts I'd collected, and only kept those details which seemed to me really evocative of the place or meaningful for the story. You are right about my metaphorical intention. I try to portray people in such a way that they serve as metaphors for something universal. Travelling was a great help to me: I've lived in Hungary, Italy, the United States, Canada, England, I've spent a lot of time in France and Spain... And from all this I used only what makes sense everywhere.

How did you manage to pay for all those travels, the research, etc.? Did you have a fellowship?

IN PRAISE

Actually I only began to travel after the success of ~~AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE~~. But then I found that the New York publisher who had bought world rights to the novel didn't pay me, and I started a lawsuit against him in New York, which went on for seven years. That was the most expensive part of the "research" for AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE. During this time I didn't earn much money for travelling or lawyers - or eating, for that matter). I was saved by a magical person: Mr. Thomas Murray, manager of the London branch of the Royal Bank of Canada. For some strange reason Mr. Murray believed that I would be capable of surviving the lawsuit and writing AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE, and to enable me to do it he supported with loans for years and years. That was how I was able to travel, pay my lawyers and write. I've never won prizes or fellowships. I've never had any luck with foundations or literary committees, but instead I had this extraordinary bank manager. Incidentally, that's why I'm against the nationalization of banks. Because in a nationalized bank, a not too well known author writing a controversial novel would never get a cent. On the other hand, during those ten years I lived modestly: I didn't buy big cars or anything for style. Mr. Murray saw that I was travelling a lot, staying in inexpensive apartments, and I suppose he considered the money well spent. He appears as a character in the novel, the bank manager who helps Mark. The sad thing is that he has now retired.

The structure of your book is very complex. We were speaking of Wolfe's BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES. I believe that the difference lies in the literary dimension of AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE, every scene gives a twist to the previous scene, and nothing is predictable. Whereas when you get to page 100 of Wolfe's book you can imagine everything that comes after. How did you work at this complex structure?

In the first place, I only write about passionate characters, and people with strong feelings are always surprising. On the other hand, I am keenly aware of how little people's intentions have to do with the results of their actions. Two of the worst blows which Mark suffers are dealt by two of his friends, who do what they do with the intention of helping him. This sort of thing happens every day in real life, but not so much in novels. I'm also fascinated by the way that people's lives interconnect, changing their respective directions. But we're talking about the end-result. I worked on this novel for twelve years. I wrote a first draft very quickly and felt very unhappy about it. Then I went on writing and writing. Bernard Shaw said that the most important thing in a play is how men and women come together, and I spent half a year writing various versions of how Mark and Marianne become lovers. But nothing would suggest how passionately Mark waits and longs for Marianne. And then at dawn one morning, half a year later, in the South of France, inspiration came to me: the scene in which Mark makes love with Marianne after making love with another girl. That is, the joy he feels after making love with the first girl, seeing that she is happy, gives him the courage to go to the other woman who is more important to him. It was not only a surprising action, it also personified a law of masculine nature. For me it was basic - before it occurred to me I was completely desperate. And when I saw this scene, walking on the beach at three in the morning, I understood that now I had the novel, because I could say something new about love. In a novel you must say something new about love; if you don't manage this, the novel won't do.

...Another of the complicated things in the book is the hero's childhood, and I wrote a lot about this. If there is surprise in my books it's because everything that is true is surprising. And I drew from my experience what had surprised me; and conversely, what did not surprise me did not seem to me to be good or useful.

You say, quoting Shakespeare, that people who suffer in their childhood can only be poor devils or princes... Precisely because of their insecurity...

To express this insecurity in a dramatic way took me several long attempts in Madrid, Paris and Rome. I just couldn't manage to express it in a couple of brief chapters. And then, I was in Marbella, again it was dawn, and I thought of a sentence, "Such happy fancies gave him courage to fall asleep". And from this sentence I knew how to write the three chapters about the childhood. I knew what I could get out of it.

In IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN you maintain that a woman can see when a man likes women and you say that women like a man who likes women. That introduces something different from the classic notion of the man as predatory hunter.

Yes, that's basic. Especially in America there are a lot of stupid men who look at women as prey, as something to be conquered.