



International Fiction Book Club

Delphine de Vigan – *Based on a True Story*

Monday 14 December, 6.30pm by Zoom

The ninth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 14 December at 6.30pm.

We discussed *Based on a True Story* by Delphine de Vigan, translated from the French by George Miller, and published in paperback and as an eBook by Bloomsbury.

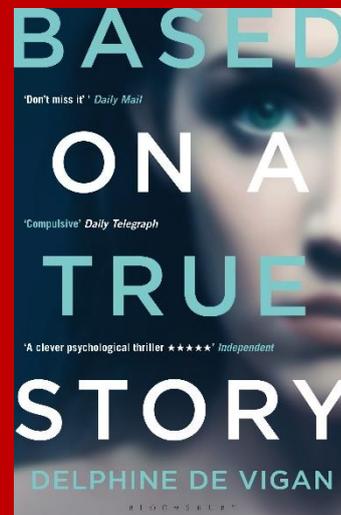
About the Book

What would you do if your closest friend tried to steal your life?

‘Combining the allure of *Gone Girl* with the sophistication of literary fiction, *Based on a True Story* is a creepy but an unapologetically clever psychological thriller’ *Independent*

‘Compulsive’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘Don’t miss it’ *Daily Mail*



We chose this book for its sheer verve, combining a page-turning plot with a thought-provoking exploration of the way fiction establishes its own truth.

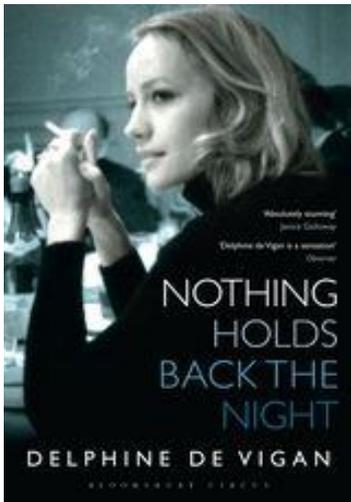
If you haven't read *Based on a True Story* yet, we hope you will. An edited transcript of our discussion with Delphine de Vigan and George Miller follows.

Bill Hi, George. Hi Delphine. It's great to see you. And it's really kind of you both to spare the time because normally you might be sitting down to dinner now. We've been discussing *Based on a True Story* in our book club which meets every month to talk about a recent book in translation and I can tell you that everyone enjoyed it enormously. Delphine, I'm going to kick off by asking, did *Based on a True Story* grow out of the response to your previous book, *Nothing Holds Back the Night*?



Photo © Delphine Jouandeau

Delphine I'm sorry, I haven't spoken English for years, but yes, yes, really. The two books are closely linked. When *Nothing Holds Back the Night* was published I met many readers on book tours and in bookshops who were always asking me, Is it true? Is everything true about the book? They always wanted to know if *Nothing Holds Back the Night* was totally true. And I was always wondering, Was it so important? Would the book be less interesting if it wasn't a real story? If think that *Based on a True Story* began with these questions about reality. Why is it so important whether the book is true or not? Does a story have to be true to be interesting? And so on.



Bill Thank you, Delphine. Now we're going to go round the screen in order.

Chris My question would be not whether the story is true in external reality, but whether it represents the conflict in the writer's head, between her as a person and her as the successful author she has become, and the demands that this has placed upon her – the character 'L' being this alter ego.

Delphine Yes, of course. I could explain it really better in French, but... I wanted to mix all the codes of narrative fiction, and I wanted the book to be a thriller and a reflection about literature, and I wanted the book to be a way to show all the internal conflicts which can appear for a writer. In the book, I quote Stephen King, who says in one of his novels – I don't remember

the English title of the book, but it's about a writer who asks himself, 'Who are you when you write?'¹ And that's a question I am wondering very often: Who am I when I'm writing? And the story between L and Delphine, the narrator, is a way to express this strange feeling sometimes to be someone else when you're writing and you don't know what part of yourself is writing. Is it something very unconscious? Is it you? Very often I have the feeling when I finish a book that there is a book I

'I wanted the book to be a thriller and a reflection about literature'

¹ Stephen King: *The Dark Half*.

think I've written, and then I discover I've written another book. And sometimes it takes me a few weeks or sometimes a few months, or sometimes maybe years later, I tell myself, 'Oh, in fact, it's a book about...'

I'll try to be more concrete by explaining what happened with the book I've just finished. I had the feeling that it was a very, very different book from everything that I'd written before. I spent several months writing it, and I was wondering why I had this idea to write about the subject. It's a book about the internet and YouTube. Then, when I finished it, and I gave it to my publisher, and maybe a few weeks later, I just realised, I understood why I wrote this book. I just realised that it was, in fact, maybe the same book I've written many times, but just in another shape. And, you know, I have the feeling that I'm always writing about the same things. But I try to find new forms.

Bill What's the title of this new one?

Delphine In French? It's called *Les enfants sont rois* (*Children Are Kings*). It's a French expression to say that kids can do everything.

Bill And when will that come out?

Delphine In France, I hope it will come out in March if everything's OK, because the bookshops were closed for a long time.

Bill Now we're going to go round the room. But if, as you're formulating your question, you think it might be more appropriate for the translator, then please address your question to George. And we go to Sam first.

Sam Hi Delphine. I find that this is a novel that's deeply engaged with French literary theory and with French literary traditions in general. So you mention, obviously, Marguerite Duras, Roland Barthes, and I also thought when I was reading of books like André Gide's *Les Faux monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*), for instance, Michel Butor's *L'emploi du temps* (*Passing Time*), that kind of idea of a novel that's being written as we're reading it. And in general, this whole tradition in the French *nouveau roman*, for instance, of narrative play and experimentalism. And so I'm just wondering how you define your relationship as a contemporary writer with those literary traditions?

Delphine I have a feeling that I belong to this tradition you just mentioned and that I have inherited the way the *nouveau roman* broke the rules, you know, and now I have a feeling that we have really huge freedom. For a French writer, everything is possible. We are very lucky, in a way, because we can write in a very traditional way, what we could call the 'old novel', and we can also break all the rules, as we did with the *nouveau roman* – the 'new novel'. So, we can write in a very personal and autobiographical way, we can write fiction, what we call now *exo-fiction*² – many things can be used and mixed, and as a writer, I have a feeling that you can really mix a

French writers 'can write in a very traditional way... and we can also break all the rules'

² Novels without fiction. See 'Novels without fictions' by Jürgen Ritte, *European Literature Network*, 23 October 2015, <https://www.eurolitnetwork.com/novels-without-fictions-by-jurgen-ritte>. See also Javier Cercas *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Novel* (London, MacLehose Press, 2018).

lot of things. And that's one of the aspects which interests me a lot is to take the different ways of writing and the different codes and to mix them and to transgress. That's what I did with *Based on a True Story*, which is a false autobiography. And that's what I've done more recently with *Les enfants sont rois*, the next book, which is a thriller and a *roman policier*, which seems to be a detective novel, but in fact, it's about our time and the way we use social networks, and how kids and teenagers use social networks, or how they are used by their parents. And so I like to mix everything. As a French writer I have the feeling that we really have a huge freedom.

Kate Thank you both for the novel, we've all enjoyed it tremendously. I enjoyed particularly the discussion about the importance of truth, particularly towards the end, where there are comments about it 'strengthening the writing' right the way through, to 'it's necessary not to con the reader'. Perhaps I could put my question to George, whether in translating it was easy to get that balance between playing with the reader in a way and conning the reader perhaps – if it was fiction presented as truth.

George I think Delphine did all the hard work, if I can put it like that. I think there was already so much richness and subtlety there. And it was really my job to pay attention to that, to be attentive to it as I was translating, by repeatedly going over it, looking for the resonances, the correspondences, the connections. And really, just to try to be faithful to those, to pick up on those, and to render them in my version of it, but I think all the careful planning and the subtlety were already there. It was simply my job to be attentive as I went through with my translation. And of course, the process of translation starts with reading very closely, repeatedly, and then when you're translating it, you're working side by side, and then you're sometimes stepping away from the French and going back to the French and going up very close and standing back and putting your camera in lots of different vantage points in order to see if what you've done is respectful, is honouring what is there in the original.

Alex Delphine, I was really interested in what you were saying about when you are writing a book that you're not quite sure which facet of your personality is writing, so you might not know how it might turn out. What's interesting is that if we take that to mean that L might be an alter ego, did you know that she was going to turn out to be so nasty?



George Miller. Photo © Livi Miller

'The process of translation ... starts with reading very closely'

Delphine Oh, yes, yes. You know, when I write a novel, I have always a long time of preparation, and what I call incubation of all my novels, and I prepare them a lot before writing. And generally speaking, I know almost everything of what will happen in the novel. Of course, it can change and, and sometimes I can change my mind, or something appears which I didn't expect, but for most things I know what will happen, and I have a kind of plan, in a very scholarly way, especially for this book, *Based on a True Story*, because you have three parts, and I knew exactly what I will put in each one, and what will happen and how the character will behave. And it was built like a script. For me, it's very close to the work that I do for movies, you know, because I'm also a scriptwriter. It was close to this kind of work. Of course, after that there is work to be done on the language and the writing, but I really imagine the book like a screenplay. And I wanted some clues, which are in the first part or the second part, to be invisible. But when you arrive in the third part, you can remember that you read something in the earlier parts, which now allows you to wonder if L exists or not. And I wanted the reader to have some clues in the first and the second part, which maybe could warn you that something is strange. For example, Delphine and L always meet together and nobody sees L except Delphine. So I hope that when you read the first and the second part, you don't find it strange, but when you arrive in the third part, you begin to realise that maybe L doesn't exist. I'm sure I've not been very clear. But I just wanted to say that I construct my novels carefully and generally I know what will happen. And of course, sometimes I can change my mind. But most of the time I know what I will tell and I just have to write it, which is the most difficult part in fact, but when I begin to write I am writing something I already imagined.

'I wanted the reader to question himself or herself about her or his own relationship with fiction'

Jo I really enjoyed the book and I identified hugely with the main character and I remember experiencing very similar things – not poisoning! – but having friends who were manipulative in this way. And I'd like to just ask whether you've had that experience and to what extent is this story based on a true story?

Delphine I won't answer this question, because it's really the question of the book, you know, but I hope that you can identify yourself when you read it. Because I think we all have had this kind of experience to meet someone who is a bit manipulative in friendship or at work or in your family. And I think we all have experienced something like that. And sometimes it's just, it's not very important, sometimes it makes you very uncomfortable. I have had different experiences of that during my life, or rather, in my family circle. And probably in friendship, it happens to me to have this feeling of something which becomes a bit too invasive. But *Based on a True Story* is really a play on reality and fiction and a mix of reality and fiction. And I wanted the reader to question himself or herself about her or his own relationship with fiction. I wanted you to begin this book believing that it's a true story. And all the effects of what we call *l'effet du réel* – reality effects, I don't know in English – are done to make you believe that that you are reading my story after I published *Nothing Holds Back the Night*. And I hope that little by little, maybe as you're going on with the

reading, you begin to wonder, Is it really true? Maybe it could be? I'm not sure. And as I said earlier, is it very important? Do I need it to be true? And so on. And I wanted to question you as a reader on your relationship with fiction.

You know, I'll try to be more precise. When I did the book tour for this book, I met a woman in a bookshop and I explained better than I do now, because it was in French, all the process of writing, and the woman said to me, 'When I saw your book on the table in the bookshop, it was just – I don't like fiction'. She told me, 'I don't like to read fiction. It doesn't interest me. I like non-fiction, like testimonies, and true stories of every sort, but I don't like fiction. And when I saw your book on the table of the bookshop, because it was called *Based on a True Story* I bought it.' I said, 'OK, great.' And she said, 'I began to read and I was very stressed for you and I had a lot of sympathy for you. And then, as I went on reading, I was wondering, *Oh, it's a bit... maybe it's a bit too much*, or I'm wondering, *Is it true?* And, and after a while, I didn't care. And when I closed the book,' she said, 'you reconciled me with fiction. I'm not sure.' I said, 'Oh, thank you. It's the most beautiful thing you can tell me.' And so I hope that the book is a way to believe in the power of fiction. What I wanted to do is to show that everything can seem true, if you want to give it the appearance of reality, you know. As a writer, it's my job to make you believe that what I'm writing is true. I want even when I write fiction, I want you to believe in the characters. I want you to feel sadness or sympathy for them, rather than whether they are true or not. That doesn't matter, in fact.

Penny I think and I'd like to ask George, because when I read it, and obviously, I've only just finished it, and am still processing all the twists and turns... But in your first reading, George, how much discussion did you have to have with Delphine to work out what you were going to translate?

'It's the responsibility of the translator to try to come up with solutions'

George Well, the interesting thing, or perhaps the surprising thing is, I didn't have a discussion with Delphine. I sat down, I read it, I read it again, then I translated it. It was only when I had finished quite an advanced stage draft that Delphine saw it. And then Bill, Delphine and I collaborated on solving some of the tougher problems or the nuances and connections that needed to be sorted out. But the process for quite a lot of translators is a matter of reading the book, and then responding to it, and then putting down something which you think is your best effort to render it into English. And of course, there will be questions, and of course there will be things that need some fine-tuning, but I think it's actually the responsibility of the translator to try and come up with solutions, to take some of those policy decisions in their own language and say, this is how I think this book is best rendered into English. I think that in a way it's an unfair question to put to the author at the beginning of the process, when I'm not even quite sure what the question would be because the author has presented their work in their own language, then it's up to you to solve those problems. That's really what you're being paid for, to solve those problems of style and tone, and nuance and balance. And, as I say, spotting those connections. I think it'd be a sort of abdication of the translator's responsibility if too early in the process, they

said, 'Can you solve this question for me?', because, in a way, the translator is just a sort of specific subspecies of reader. Really, I'm doing what any reader would be doing in reading the book, processing it as a text, responding to it emotionally, you know, aesthetically, looking for connections, asking myself questions, and then I think what I have to do is to try and replicate those effects in the English translation, because, as Delphine's just been explaining, the book does ask the reader, expect the reader even, to stick with it through these things and leave things open-ended. And I think it's my job to try to capture that – that openness – for the reader in the English and so not to close things down, but to leave that field for speculation.

'In a way, the translator is just a sort of specific subspecies of reader'

Bill George, it's often said that the translator is a writer's closest reader. And you've certainly been that for Delphine. And you may be surprised to hear this, everyone, but George and Delphine haven't previously met. So they should probably say 'hello' at this point!

George Can I just say to Delphine, it's been a privilege to translate your work. It's ten years now, I realise, since *No and Me* came out in English. And it all started because I wrote to Bill. I'd seen an announcement in the *Bookseller* magazine that Bill had bought the English language rights to *No and Me*, and I got in touch – I didn't know Bill then – and I said, 'Do you need a translator by any chance?' And he said, 'Well, show me what you can do.' And here we are six books later. It's a great privilege for a translator to be able to work on several books by the same author, rather than coming in and out, and having to pick up and perhaps inheriting another translator's decisions. It's been a fantastic experience and so it's nice to meet you, Delphine, even in these rather unusual circumstances.

Delphine I'm very happy to meet you, too. And, you know, it's very, reassuring to know that you are going to translate the next one, because I always have very good reports... I can read in English, but you know, my English is not good enough to pick up on the nuances and to know if the translation is really good or not, unfortunately. But I have friends who are native speaking from different countries where I am translated, and sometimes they say the translation's not so good or it's so-so, but for my English translations, I have always had very good and enthusiastic reactions.

George Thank you, and that's very good to hear. It'd be embarrassing if you had had to come on and say, 'Your translations are terrible'.

Delphine No, I'm happy!

Bill In the New Year Bloomsbury will publish a short novel by Delphine called *Gratitude*, which is probably one of the most challenging texts to translate (**Delphine** Yes!), not least because of the wordplay which naturally works beautifully in the French, but presents a real challenge for the translator. It's about an old lady who has aphasia and is losing her language, but instead of just having a blank, she'll come up with what you might call a portmanteau word. So, for example, right at the very beginning of the book, her neighbour who's come to see her in the retirement home she's just moved into, says,

'Shall we do such and such?' and the old lady would normally say '*D'accord*', meaning 'OK', and of course, that word has escaped her, but another one pops up in its place. Now she says '*D'abord*', which means 'At first', but it sounds like '*D'accord*'. So George had to really think about what would be a plausible homophone in English for 'OK' or 'alright'. And you will be able to see the result in what I think is a brilliant translation when it is published in January.

Stephen I really enjoyed the book, like everyone else did. And, certainly, when you say, Delphine, that you want the reader to question his relationship with fiction, that's certainly what you did for me. So, in your opening remarks this evening, you posed the question about how important it is to know if something is true or not. You, as the author, know at which point the line is crossed from reality to fiction. And you also said that when you write a book sometimes you realise after it's left you that it's become something else, in some ways different from what you thought you had originally created. So my question is this: how do you feel then, in the light of the fact you know where the line is in your writing, between reality, drawing on your experiences, and fiction – how do you feel about the reader drawing the line differently and the book becoming something other than you intended it to be?

Delphine You know, the book always becomes something different than what you intended it to be. When you write and when you meet readers it's probably the first lesson you have to hear and to accept. There are as many readings of the book and interpretations of the book as readers, you know, and I discovered that with *No and Me*, which was the first book of mine which met with success in France. And when I met the readers, some came to see me and told me, 'You know, I love your book, it's so dark. How can you write something so dark?' and so on. And then the next reader told me, 'I love your book, you know, it's so optimistic, it's so full of light and that's wonderful,' and so on. And you have to accept that the book always escapes you, and that you can't control anything and the reader in his or her reading is right. For *Based on a True Story*, I was in one of the tours I mentioned before, and after I'd spent one hour explaining all the process and why I wanted to mix the codes and so on. And really, during the meeting, it was obvious that the book was a mix of fiction and reality and that I didn't want to answer too clearly about what is true and what is not true, but to explain the power of fiction and, and the tribute I wanted to write to fiction and so on. And after the meeting, a woman came up to me and asked, 'How is your foot? Is it repaired?' [*In the novel, the narrator slips on the stairs and breaks her foot.*] And I said 'I never broke my foot, you know?' thinking of all that I explained before... And I was so upset. And then I said, 'No, she's right. Maybe.' I said, 'OK, OK'. Because she wanted to believe that everything was true. She didn't want to question that. She had decided that the whole book was true. And in a way, she was right. You know, I didn't have to contest that. That was her reading. And another reader would probably

'There are as many readings and interpretations of the book as there are readers'

think, the opposite. And it's his reading. And as a writer, you have to accept that your book no longer belongs to you when it's published.

Bill Now we have just time for one more question.

Margaret My question is, I guess, again, about truth, because the auto-fiction idea really started in France and is much more popular in France, I think, still, whether you think that your English-speaking readers are still more obsessed with the idea of whether it's true or not, or whether the French are just as much whether it's a universal desire to know, is it true? How true is it?

And a kind of secondary question to that is this: I think my favourite characters were the goldfish in the pond, and I felt that, that they represented, maybe, the writer – two of the aspects of the writer. And the thing with the goldfish is that in the end, they devour each other. And if you felt that maybe having to put all this truth in, is that kind of 'self-devouring' a bit? The eating away of yourself with the having to put truth in? Or is it just explaining that it's not true?

Delphine I think it just the same everywhere, you know. In all the countries the questions were the same. As a reader myself, it happens very often that when I read a book, I'm asking if it's true or not, or even which is the autobiographical part of the book, I think it's just very human behaviour you know. But I didn't understand your second question.

Margaret I guess the question was if saying that the goldfish will eat themselves if they don't have anything else is saying that a writer is kind of eating herself by having to constantly bring out these truths in a book?

Delphine I don't know. Yes, maybe it's a metaphorical way of seeing what a writer can do. You know, I always have the feeling that we are really obsessed with certain patterns. It's very difficult to explain where a book comes from, where it actually originates, and I have very often the feeling that it comes from somewhere – like we say in French – a 'black box', which is not accessible, you know, but everything comes from that. And, and sometimes I have a feeling that this kind of black box you have inside yourself – and you don't know exactly where it is and where it comes from – can devour you as writer. Yes, I have already had this feeling, and that can be a bit disturbing.

'It's very difficult to explain where a book comes from, where it actually originates'

That's why I can't write all the time, you know. I have some periods when I write and some periods when I do something else just to regenerate myself.

Bill Thank you. Thank you both very much. And just a quick question to you, George. What are you working on at the moment?

George I translate every month for *Le Monde diplomatique*, so at this time of the month, articles come in from journalists all over the world in French and I translate them. They could be about politics or economics or social issues or whatever. That's my bread and butter translating, but at the moment I'm waiting for the next Delphine de Vigan, of course!

Bill On that very happy note, it's time to say goodbye. And Delphine, thank you so much for coming all the way from Paris. It's a special journey that you've made, because those

of us who have to use Zoom regularly are Zoomed out. So thank you for giving us three-quarters of an hour of your time. And George, likewise, that was a really enjoyable session. Thank you both so much.

Delphine Thank you very much for reading the book. Goodbye.

Delphine de Vigan is a prize-winning French novelist and screenwriter, whose previous novels in English include No and Me, Underground Time, Nothing Holds Back the Night and Loyalties (all published by Bloomsbury). She lives in Paris.

George Miller has translated all of Delphine de Vigan's 7 novels to appear in English, including Gratitude (Bloomsbury, January 2021). He has also translated Disordered World by Amin Maalouf and translates for Le Monde diplomatique.

Bill Swainson is a freelance editor and literary consultant, a trustee of Litfest and, with Sam O'Donoghue of DeLC at Lancaster University, convenor of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.

Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 18 January at 6.30pm** is *The Four Books* by Yan Lianke, translated from the Chinese by Carlos Rojas, and published in paperback and eBook by Vintage.

'A Chinese novel hailed across the planet as a masterpiece ... For once, the hype doesn't go far enough ... A devastating brilliant slice of living history' *The Times*

A meditation 'on the meaning of integrity, truth, love, ethics when confronted with horror. It is an extraordinary novel' *Observer*

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at litfestbill@gmail.com.

