

A Second, Silent Language: A Conversation with Jon Fosse

Remo Verdickt interviews Jon Fosse

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IF BRITISH PUBLISHER Fitzcarraldo Editions' winning streak of Nobel Prize laureates extends to 2023, there's a good chance our interview subject will be next. Jon Fosse, born in Norway in 1959, has just had his magisterial *Septology* — which gathers the novels *The Other Name* (2019), *I Is Another* (2020), and *A New Name* (2021) — published as one volume by both Fitzcarraldo and Transit Books. The trilogy tells the story of Asle, a painter who is perpetually traveling from one beacon of his life to another. The book's form is notorious — one long sentence stretching on for nearly 700 pages.

Fosse answered our questions with a nervous yet amused voice, leaning forward to emerge from the darkness of his Oslo residence. The Ministry of Culture loaned him the house as a

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recognition of his contributions to Norwegian literature, an honor about which the author is quite sanguine: “You get it when you’re 50, but then they expect you to die by 80.”

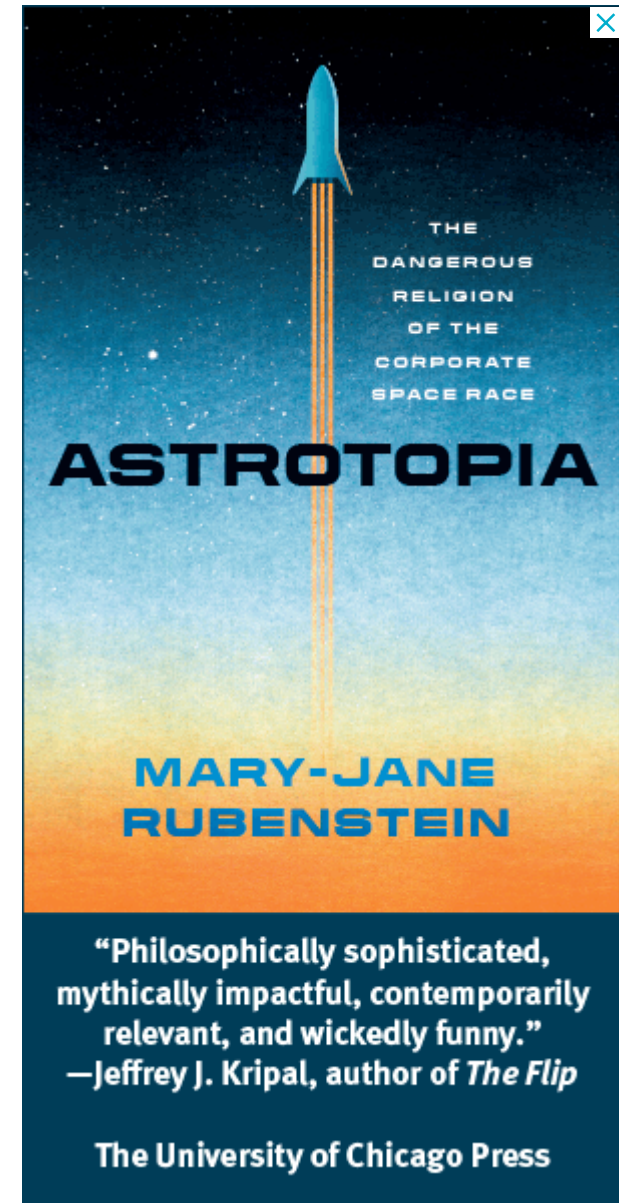
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REMO VERDICKT & EMIEL ROTHOOFT: The three volumes of *Septology* have just been issued as one book. Do you think this will lead to a different reading experience?

JON FOSSE: When I wrote *Septology*, I considered it to be one text, a whole. I agreed with my publishers to split it into separate volumes, but it remains a unity. What happens early on in the first part gets answered in the seventh [the three books are divided into seven sections]. There are bits and pieces paired together between the different parts. For instance, it’s possible to only read parts I and II, or even only the final two, and you can still get something out of it. But to me, it’s a unity, and it needs to be available in one all-encompassing volume.

As with many of your protagonists, *Septology*’s narrator, Asle, is often on the road. Travel is sometimes a metaphor for self-discovery but also for its opposite, aimlessness. What does it signify for you?

When I sit down and start writing, I never intend for anything to happen. I listen to what I’m writing, and what happens happens. Of course, you can interpret it in several ways. It’s not my job to explain it — I’m just a writer. My interpretation would be less valuable than yours. [Laughs.] But I feel that if I’m



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writing well, there's a lot of what I might call *meaning*, even a kind of message. But I cannot put it into simple words. I can only guess as much as you can.

You once wrote in an essay that you must try and overcome language, move beyond it, so that there is no longer difference and one can reach God. Is it truly only without language that we can come closer to the divine?

I'm very afraid of using the word "God." I rarely do it and never when talking about my own writing. God is far too much for me to talk about. [*Laughs.*] When I manage to write well, there is a second, silent language. This silent language says what it is all about. It's not the story, but you can hear something *behind* it — a silent voice speaking. It's this that makes literature work well for me.

The seven parts of *Septology* make up one single sentence. What was that writing process like?

Everything I write has to be a universe of its own, ruled by its own laws. When writing such a universe, I have to be completely in it. Of course, I can take breaks, but I have to stick to the universe of what I'm writing. Perhaps most important is its *rhythm*. I can't really explain what I mean by that, but it is a flow that I have to follow.

My most famous play is called *Somebody Is Going to Come*. I believe I wrote that in four or five days, and I didn't change anything afterward. It is often like that

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with my writing.

With *Septology*, it is quite another story. I wrote most of this book living just outside of Vienna, where my wife and I have a flat in a small town called Hainburg an der Donau. I wrote late at night until the morning, from five to nine a.m. After that, I slept for about an hour. Usually, I didn't write in the afternoon.

Your work has been called “slow prose,” but to us, a lot of your writing does not feel slow at all. How would you describe it?

Although I started out as a poet and novelist, my breakthrough came when I started writing plays. For 15 years, I basically only wrote for the theater. It was a huge surprise to me, and, in the beginning, a bit of an adventure. I wrote plays mainly during the summer. The rest of the year, I spent a lot of time traveling to theaters abroad, giving interviews, etc.

Then, suddenly, I felt it was enough. I stopped traveling, stopped drinking, stopped doing a lot of things. I decided to go back to where I came from, back to writing “my kind” of prose and poetry. After I finished the first prose text, *Wakefulness* [2007], I didn't write anything for some years. I felt rather fragile, and I didn't dare to travel because writing is a kind of journey into the unknown. I have to be on the borderland, and that's just fine when I'm in a good and healthy state, but if I'm very fragile, it scares me.



The image is a promotional banner for SPD Handpicked. At the top left is the SPD logo (a yellow circle with 'SPD' in black) and the word 'Handpicked' in a white, cursive font. Below this are four book covers arranged in a 2x2 grid. The top-left cover is 'RIGHT' by ENNIO MOLTEDO, featuring a night sky with a road leading to a horizon. The top-right cover is 'ALMOST OBSCENE' by RAÚL GÓMEZ JATTIN, featuring a man in a hammock. The bottom-left cover is 'A LIGHT TO DO SHELLWORK BY' by GEORGIANA VALOYCE-SANCHEZ, featuring seashells on a beach. The bottom-right cover is 'THE PIEDIC PRODIGESIM & OTHER STORIES' by Mark Vossler, featuring a teal background with white decorative elements. At the bottom of the banner, it says '20% off a curated selection of new titles.' and 'www.spdbooks.org'.

I'm to blame, by the way, for this term "slow prose." [*Laughs.*] I wanted to contrast it to the plays. My plays are rather short, and I always needed a strong intensity to work with. You cannot dwell on things for an extended period — theater isn't like that. But with my prose, I wanted to give each and every moment the time I felt it needed. I wanted the language to flow in a peaceful way. I think I managed to do that in *Septology*.

There's this one sex scene that *Septology*'s narrator is witnessing — or, rather, imagining. Do you yourself ever feel like a voyeur of your own mind? Have you ever seen things in your own mind that you felt you shouldn't be seeing?

Oh, yes. Not all the time, but I also have this ability. It was great writing this scene at the playground. I was and am still very happy about it. Asle is seeing his younger self and his wife being intimate years earlier, but he's actually in their physical presence. Later, he even meets and talks to them. *Septology* mixes these timelines into one — that's the wholeness that's so important.

In the fifth or sixth part, the younger Asle is looking out the window, and he sees a car driving by. That's the very car the older Asle is driving, as he is going to Bjørgvin with his paintings. To me, that's a *moment* — the whole novel is a kind of moment.

You've always written in Nynorsk, never in Bokmål, the other Norwegian language. Was writing in Nynorsk a political act for you?

No, it's simply my language. It's what I learned from my first day in school until I left, so for some 12 or 13 years. It's a minority language, and that's only an advantage for me as a writer. It's almost never used in commercials or business the way it is in academia, literature, and in church. Since it isn't used too much, it has a kind of freshness to it that Bokmål doesn't have. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote this book called *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [1975]. When I read it, I felt that writing in Nynorsk was very similar to Kafka's situation.

In *Septology*, the narrator talks a lot about the mystic Meister Eckhart. Eckhart is often noted as an influence for contemporary writers such as Fleur Jaeggy and yourself. Why does he appeal to you?

I started reading Meister Eckhart in the mid-1980s. It was a great experience. After finishing university, I read him a lot, alongside Martin Heidegger. I felt he was like Heidegger, but in a much deeper way. Eckhart is the writer who has influenced me the most. He has a vision completely his own. In my teens, I was a kind of stupid Marxist and atheist — it was the normal thing to be in those days for young, aspiring intellectuals. But in the process of writing, there was something I couldn't quite understand, some mystery: where does it come from? It doesn't come from here [*points to his heart*]. No, it's from out there.

I started to believe in God as a person, in a way. I call myself a believer in God, as a presence simultaneously out there and right here. But like Eckhart, I had no dogmatics.

I felt the need to share this way of believing with someone else, so I went to the Quakers. You're in a silent circle, and if you feel like you have something important to say, then you say it. If not, you just keep quiet. At a certain point, I felt no need for it anymore. I felt that my own writing was my own "silent meeting" or my way of being a Quaker — my way of praying.

Then I was simply a writer for many years, and I had no one to share my kind of belief with. In the mid-1980s, I went to mass in a Catholic church in Bjørgvin, and I liked it, to the point that I even started to attend a course to become a Catholic — yes, like Asle, more or less. Only many years later, I decided to convert to the Catholic Church. I couldn't have done it if it wasn't for Meister Eckhart and his way of being both a Catholic and a mystic.

Would you consider yourself a Catholic, mystic writer as well?

This mystic side has to do with when I was seven years old and close to dying. It was an accident. I saw myself from outside, in a kind of shimmering light, peaceful, a very happy state, and I'm quite sure that accident, that moment, that close-to-death experience formed me as a writer. Without that, I doubt I would have even been one. It's very fundamental for me. This experience opened my eyes to the spiritual dimension of life, but being a Marxist, I tried to deny this as hard as I could.

What changed my mind is my own writing. The older I got, the more I felt the need to share my belief with others. I felt it in a good and peaceful way in the

Catholic Mass. I prefer the Orthodox Mass, but for a Westerner, it's very hard to get into the Orthodox mindset — the references are quite different. I knew so much of the Catholic Church that I didn't manage to jump over to the Orthodox Church.

Some authors you've been compared to are said to be writers of “metaphysical fiction.” Would you consider yourself among them?

I've been labeled a lot of things — a postmodernist, a minimalist — and I labeled myself a writer of “slow prose.” I don't want to call myself anything. I call myself a Christian, but it's very hard for me. It's so reductionist. In a way, I am a minimalist, of course, and in another way, I am a postmodernist — I was influenced by Jacques Derrida. So, it's not necessarily wrong, but I could never use such a concept for my own writing, as if to say, “It is like that.”

Was your conversion akin to Asle's?

These days it's very popular to use things you've experienced in your own writing and to write it as close to reality as possible, as Annie Ernaux does. Just now, I read this short novel by [Ernaux] called *Simple Passion* [1991], and I like it — it's quite okay. But to me, it's completely impossible to use my own experiences in such a way, because writing is all about transformation. I listen to a universe that is different from mine, and writing is a way to escape into this universe. That's the great thing about it. I want to get away from myself, not to express myself.

Of course, I'm using my own life. I know what I'm talking about. Still, *Septology* is just an invention — I was never a painter. I'm using my own life and what I've read as material, not as something I want to write in a realistic way. Everything is transformed. When I write, my experience becomes nothing, flat. My experiences don't have wings, but when I write well, I manage to make them fly. I'm on the opposite side of "autofiction" — I'm simply writing fiction.

What do you think when people call it autofiction?

Some people read it like that, but once you know a little about my life, you know it isn't like that. If I write about a mother, many will think I'm writing about my own mother, but I've never done that and will never do it. I'm not allowed to do it. I cannot use the life of another human being in my fiction. I can use traits, but I have to transform them. There's something very unethical about autofiction.

Why have you returned to playwriting?

After writing *Septology*, I felt a strong need to write a play again. You feel this emptiness when you're through with a big book, and I thought, *why not write a play?* Not an ambitious one, just a short piece, so I wrote one called *Strong Wind*. Having written that play, the one led to the next. I've even written a fourth play that I haven't published yet. It's just lying on my table here. In the future, I will never go back to writing plays the way I did — only now and then.

You write in *Septology*, “[W]hat’s beautiful in life turns out bad in a painting because it’s like there’s too much beauty.” Can there be such a thing as too much beauty in literature?

Yes, I think so. You can write a perfect poem in each and every way, and when you read it, it’s beautiful, but you get the feeling that the writing is just clever, without soul. A beautiful face has something wrong about it. These symmetrical faces in advertisements are ugly to me. Beauty is in what is wrong, even in literature and art.

We thank you for this conversation.

My pleasure. And as the good Catholic I am, I wish you *Pax et Bonum!*



Jon Fosse, February 2019. Image supplied by author. Photo by Tom A. Kolstad.

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