



Viva la résistance

How did a small French novel beat the odds to become a quiet cult hit in Chicago?

By Jonathan Messinger

If ever there was a strange trip in publishing, Benoit Duteurtre was on it. The French anarchist and author of ten novels stood in the Book Cellar in Lincoln Square on April 12, speaking in French to a room full of sudden fans, while a former employee of the Cellar translated. Duteurtre was speaking to a room of Americans who, in all likelihood, had never heard of him before his satirical novel *The Little Girl and the Cigarette* was picked up for translation—his first into English—by a small house in Hoboken, New Jersey, called Melville House Books.

How this journalist and protégé of Samuel Beckett got there is an object lesson in the way independent publishing and independent book selling can work hand-in-hand to elevate an unknown book to veritable cult status (and sales success, but that comes later). It's an old, frayed yarn about the odds against small-press books. A combination of low print runs, zero marketing budgets, scant media attention and tour difficulties put a book published by a small house at a sizable disadvantage to those published by conglomerates. Never mind that Duteurtre's book has the other sales drawbacks of being a translation.

It all starts with an employee at the Book Cellar, who had heard about the book and decided he'd give it a shot. He liked it enough to recommend to another employee, who then read it in her book club. The two of them decided to file it under "staff recommended" and talk it up in the shop.

"It's definitely something we're passionate about," says Katie Capaldi, one of the Cellar's sales associates who got behind the book. "If we find a rare gem of a book, we create displays around it. We have pretty frequent customers and I know what they've read. Hopefully it spreads from there."

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According to the Book Cellar's owner, Suzy Takacs, the book sold nine copies in March. That's not the sort of total that would set corks popping at the Borders HQ in Ann Arbor—nor in the New York digs of any of the megapublishers. But for an unknown book, it's the kind of figure that catches a bookstore owner's eye, as well as the attention of its publisher.

"It sounds like hokum, but we're really in this together," says Dennis Johnson, Melville House's publisher. "The fact is that they wouldn't do this unless it was a good book and they felt comfortable recommending it to their

customers. But indie publishers need a certain number of bookstores across the country really promoting your wares. We've got to foster those relationships because they're doing something different than the chains."

What happened next for this *Little Girl* was even less likely. Generally, when a book comes out in translation, the country of its origin gets behind it, either through some publicity or by sending the author to America for a tour. Generally, that comes with proper notice. The French Book Office called Johnson on a Thursday, and told him Duteurtre would be in America on Monday.

"We looked at stores where the book had been selling, called them up and said, 'We know this is ridiculous, and it's probably going to make you angry, but we have to ask, can we do an event?'" Johnson laughs. "The Book Cellar was the only store in America that could match where the embassy was sending him. It's just smart business on the one hand, but on the other hand very few stores do that kind of business."

According to Takacs, the book sold 21 copies in April, totaling 30 before this story went to press—"a ton" for the small store. And suddenly there was Duteurtre, at his only stop in an American bookstore, watching his little book about a little girl turn into a little sensation.

The Book Cellar (4736-38 N Lincoln Ave) has a copy of The Little Girl and the Cigarette (\$14.95) set aside for you.

Reviews

Committed

★★★★★

By Dan Mathews. Atria, \$24.

Early into PETA vice president Mathews's memoir *Committed*, you get the feeling the title of the book isn't referring to a devotion to animal welfare at all. Rather, there's a growing sense that this man, known for defiling the corporate offices of high-end pro-fur designers and heaping red paint upon fashionistas, is going to one day be committed to an institution for his high-profile antics. Lo and behold, the last chapter finds Mathews arrested and awaiting psychiatric evaluation at the Hotel-Dieu, a mental hospital in Paris, after trashing a KFC with cohorts Chrissie Hynde and PETA cofounder Ingrid Newkirk. What comes in between is a lively study into both the origins of activism and how to capture the attention of a nation that has no attention span.

The beginning chapters of *Committed* read like an alternate version of an Augusten Burroughs memoir. Mathews and his brothers are chaperoned through life by their impoverished but upbeat divorcée mother, who moves the family across town in shopping carts and cobbles together funds to send them off to ballet class to hang out with gays. Unsurprisingly, we learn that misfit Mathews was destined for a life of activism. As an overweight, gay, punk vegetarian who rescued no less than 17 stray cats in his youth, he fits the bill. But what sets Mathews and, eventually, his PETA partners apart from other groups, is the zeal with which they deliver their message.

Anyone annoyed by PETA (at some point that's surely everyone) can at least appreciate the organization's media savvy. Crashing runway shows naked or protesting alongside busty Pam Anderson surely will attract more attention than handing out leaflets. Mathews knows this and clearly revels in it. He's an activist with ADD, an Auntie Mame for the antifur crowd.

But forget for a moment about his PETA affiliation. Mathews's story goes beyond his politics. *Committed* is about the single-minded pursuit of a cause, in an era when most people think devotion means never missing an episode of *Dancing with the Stars*.—Jason Heidemann