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Philippe Vigand on Disability, Masculinity, and Ecology

Abstract
The increase in publications in French dealing with physical impairment and disability, which has been notable for the past thirty years, includes the work of Philippe Vigand who, following a cerebro-vascular accident, lived with "locked-in syndrome" and wrote six books. In this article, the ways in which Vigand engages with the concept of masculinity are studied in order to clarify the influence of the natural world itself, specifically forests and stag hunting to hounds, and of the French idea of the citizen, on his sense of his life with profound physical impairments.

Keywords:
disability, masculinity, nature, gender, stag, forest

French texts about the experience of physical impairment and disability are increasingly numerous since the 1990s (Gefen, 2017, 28). Jean-Dominique Bauby's *Le Scaphandre et le papillon* (1997) is perhaps the genre-defining contribution to the corpus of autopathographical literature by French men, which continues to grow (Gefen, 2017, 273-84). Alexandre Gefen states that "la littérature sert à repenser les frontières de la vie: elle permet de reprendre la main en vue de triompher psychiquement des limites des possibles biologiques"

(Gefen, 2017, 111-112). This article explores how Philippe Vigand (1957-2020), who was almost completely paralysed for thirty years, thinks about and represents masculinity in his writing, with his lifelong love of nature as a key element. It asks whether and to what extent Vigand, experiencing major physical impairment, interrogates the concept of masculinity as it pertains in contemporary French culture.

Elisabeth Badinter states that "il y a une véritable tâche à accomplir pour devenir un homme. La virilité n'est pas donnée d'emblée, elle doit être construite, disons 'fabriquée'" (Badinter, 1992, 15). For men who have experienced life-changing injury or illness, constructing the self becomes a conscious act, where previously they may have conformed effortlessly to prevalent ideals of masculinity within their culture. Judith Butler's concept of gender performance shows how gendered bodies follow binary norms of behaviour shared by a particular society (Butler, 1990). For Tom Shakespeare, "masculine ideology rests on a negation of vulnerability, weakness, and ultimately the body itself" (Shakespeare, 1999, 59). Philippe Vigand's work emphasizes his passion for stag-hunting to hounds on horseback in the forests of Tronçais, a risky sport with Christian connotations (Cartmill, 1993, 69), and a distinctively French social and cultural history stretching back to the Ancien Régime and earlier (Salvadori, 1996). Stag hunting is part of a long history of human predation on animals, and the hunting hypothesis suggests that such activity "entailed man's estrangement from nature" (Cartmill, 1996, 12). Philippe Vigand's passion for stag-hunting could initially be read as the *ne plus ultra* of apex predation on, domination of, and estrangement from nature. His way of writing about it, however, suggests that his relationship to forests and hunting became imbued with a broader, more holistic relationship to the natural world after his accident. Obliged to slow down, he recognises the forest as a living space of which he too is a part.

Vigand's work is not widely known; his books trace his

personal and family histories. In July 1990 at 33 years old, Vigand experienced a cerebro-vascular accident as a result of which he was physically paralysed apart from being able to blink, swallow, and move one finger. His mental faculties remained unimpaired. Thanks to sophisticated computer technology that read his eye movements and blinks, he wrote six books, the first four published by Éditions Anne Carrière: *Putain de silence* (1997) in collaboration with his wife Stéphane Vigand; *Promenades immobiles* (2000); *Meaulne, mon village* (2004) and *Légume vert* (2011); two biographies, *Au devant! La vie de Gérard Vigand, mon père* (2016) and *Monsieur MATRA: mon grand-père* (2017) were self-published.[1]

Unlike Bauby's *Le Scaphandre et le papillon*, which also deals with locked-in syndrome, Vigand's works have not been bestsellers, though the first was translated into fourteen languages (Vigand, 2000 cover information). *Putain de silence* and *Légume vert* recount the radical alteration of his way of life following his accident; *Promenades immobiles* and *Meaulne, mon village* acknowledge Vigand's changed physical circumstances, but the focus of these texts is on forests near his native village, Meaulne, and stag hunting to hounds on horseback – an activity to which Vigand was and continued to be devoted. The two biographies pay tribute to his male forebears. As a white, educated, heterosexual French man, Philippe Vigand's life before his accident exemplifies ruling-class masculinity. He was professionally successful, socially well connected and financially secure. He writes to inform readers about his life and condition, a goal shared by twenty-first-century 'therapeutic' writing (Gefen, 2017, 9).

Masculinity

Vigand wishes to convey that his personality and sense of self remain largely unchanged despite his altered physical circumstances. Central to that sense of self is his perception of himself as a man, which I have written about previously in relation to the issue of

dependence.[2] R.W. Connell points out that "masculinities come into existence at particular times and places, and are always subject to change. Masculinities are, in a word, historical" (Connell, 2005, 185). Contemporary French masculinity is shaped by modern French ideals of citizenship. Sam Haigh underlines Julia Kristeva's opinion that France is "a Republic built on notions of abstract individualism, reason, and universalism inherited from the Enlightenment: a tradition of unity and indivisibility that has tended to see difference as a threat to national coherence and as something to be eradicated, either through exclusion or integration" (Haigh, 2012, 308). Vigand's severe physical impairments mean that he relies on others for all aspects of his care, and is at risk of exclusion from professional, family, and social life. The connections made in his first four books between dependence and hegemonic concepts of white Western ableist masculinity show just how paradoxical such a state of dependence is in the French ruling-class construction of masculinity. Vigand regards independence as a self-evident characteristic of adult life that distinguishes adults from babies and children (1997, 33). By writing biographies of his father and grandfather, he weaves himself into a lineage of dynamic, professionally and socially powerful men. Eva Feder Kittay, in her work advocating for an inclusive theory of justice, states that all human beings are "vulnerable to inevitable dependency, the care of inevitable dependency, and the inextricable interdependence of humans on one another" (Feder Kittay, 2017, 306). Such a viewpoint is radically at odds with the ideal of liberty which begins France's motto.

Isabelle Ville and Jean-François Ravaud note a tension between two approaches to disability policies in France, one differentialist and the other universalist, and their negative effects on disabled persons' social situation: "the first approach sows the seeds of segregation, the second the seeds of social inequalities" (Ravaud and Ville, 2007, 141). Vigand's re-integration into family and wider society following his accident is due in large part to his

wife's loyalty and grit, best shown in their shared book, *Putain de silence*. Yet hegemonic white French manhood in the late twentieth century is founded on an abstract, universalist ideal of autonomy in every sense. Sam Haigh points out the prevalence of "resolutely individualized representations" in life-writing by disabled people in France and other countries which have been slow to abandon the medical model of disability (Haigh, 2010, 697), and Lennard Davis notes that such texts are linked to the medical model and its conceptualizations of disability (Davis, 1995, 4). Centring as they do on his individual experience, much – though, I hope to show, not all - of Vigand's work conforms with the tendencies Haigh and Davis observe. What is specific to French notions of masculinity is that, unlike the Anglo-American tradition which severs or problematizes the link between sex and gender, French work on masculinity has, perhaps due to the prevalence of psychoanalytic discourse

> tended to reify the male-female binary, to posit dominant masculinity as a given, and to pay little attention to marginal masculine identities […]. Furthermore, the work of [French] feminists and others on masculinity often solidifies rather than problematizes the male body, and thus the concept of a male 'sex', both of which are, by and large, taken for granted. (Reeser & Seifert, 2008, 16)

The work of Elisabeth Badinter seems typical in this regard, as she defends French exceptionalism with regards to masculinity, based on stereotype rather than empirical evidence (Reeser & Seifert, 2008, 17). The relative lack of reflection on masculinity in French theory arises from the universalist ideal of the French citizen, which is inherently masculinist (Reeser & Seifert, 2008, 18). Thus masculinity is considered as an 'unmarked' category in French culture, where gender studies of the kind practised in Anglo-American academia is a less prevalent, albeit growing discipline[3].

Before turning to forests and stag hunting, it is important

to underline how crucial Stéphane Vigand is in shaping Vigand's identity after his accident. She repeatedly stresses her husband's strengths when evoking their life before his accident – he was "en parfaite santé, sain jusqu'à la caricature, sportif accompli, musclé, actif" (S. Vigand, 1997, 126):

> Dynamique, infatigable, exigeant, pudique, volontaire, Philippe était un homme d'envie insatiable plus que d'ambition. Et il possédait cette qualité trop rare: la passion. Une passion infinie pour les animaux, la forêt et surtout la sylviculture, activité à laquelle il aurait aimé se consacrer si elle avait été plus rémunératrice. (S. Vigand, 1997, 113)

These descriptions suggest that, for his wife, Philippe before his accident was a perfect exemplar of the ideal Frenchman, in body, mind, and behaviour. The quote above shows how financial concerns caused Philippe to turn away from a potential career in forestry into a white-collar job, mastering his passion by the exercise of reason, until every year, he left behind "bureau, machine à calculer et soucis professionels pour m'immerger en forêt" (2000, 52). *Putain de silence* shows that Philippe adheres to a gendered division of labour and is separated from home life: "Avant mon accident, je tentais de faire cohabiter mes passions, mon travail et ma famille. Je ne consacrais à cette dernière que quelques après-midi [*sic*] dominicaux, tout en ayant le sentiment de passer à côté de l'essentiel" (1997, 104). At this point, the Vigands had two young daughters. Family is distinct from the sphere of his passions, and though he admits some unease about missing out, only his accident brings Vigand into the domestic realm, where he understands his new role as that of spectator rather than actor (1997, 59; 2004, 13), until Stéphane insists on reinstating his paternal authority, by obliging their children to ask their father for permission (S. Vigand 1997, 168-69). The fact that both parents are concerned with his effective exercise of power within the home underlines the gendered conventions that continue to govern the

nuclear middle-class family in France and are underpinned by patriarchal power dynamics. R.W. Connell observes that

> The men of the metropolitan countries are collectively the main beneficiaries of the contemporary world order. The most striking feature of their historical situation is the vastly increased power, over the natural world and over the services of other people, that the accumulation and concentration of wealth has delivered to them. (Connell, 256).

The wielding of power by men with acquired severe physical impairments requires delicate handling, since it must be facilitated by those closest to them. Vigand acknowledges wryly that his children occasionally defy him by wilfully misreading his blinks (1 for yes, 2 for no) (1997, 85). Stéphane Vigand acknowledges frankly her frequent anger, exhaustion, and impatience; she fears emotional release because she must exert immense self-control to manage the family situation (1997, 207), where she has had to "ramer comme une brute depuis sept ans" (1997, 213). The strength of her feelings (1997, 187) as she tries to "permettre une vie décente à l'homme que j'aime" (1997, 151) shows how difficult it can be to access adequate care in France. In her 'Don Quichotte et la paperasse' chapter, she details her continuous "batailles" (1997, 151) with the authorities to access state supports to which her husband is entitled. Enacting Feder Kittay's inclusive theory, Stéphane facilitates Philippe's reinsertion into a masculinity that is as familiar as possible to both of them, within the family home and in his social life, in the restaurants of Paris and in his rural village.

Ecologies

An urban/rural divide emerges throughout Vigand's writings, where Paris beyond their carefully modified home is often hostile in human terms and poorly spatially designed. Stéphane Vigand notes their luck in having two wheelchair-accessible cinemas nearby: "ce

qui constitue une sorte de miracle dans un pays où, décidément, les handicapés semblent priés de rester cloîtrés chez eux" (S. Vigand, PDS, 147). Miracles are evoked by both Stéphane and Philippe Vigand, usually ironically to convey disappointment, and this allusion to cloisters references the institutionalisation long common for disabled people in France (Barral, 2007). She observes that "il ne fait décidément pas bon être handicapé dans un environnement conçu exclusivement à l'usage des bien portants" (S. Vigand, 1997, 172-173). By contrast, Vigand represents the forests of his birth as an Edenic idyll – one chapter of *Promenades immobiles* bears the title 'Les fruits du jardin d'Eden'. He was from Meaulne in the Allier department of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region in central France, and in their home there, "au centre d'un monde né de ma seule volonté, je règne aujourd'hui sur ce bout de terre que j'ai façonné" (2000, 98), concludes Philippe. In fact, Stéphane found the house, but Philippe makes no acknowledgement of her input in acquiring or setting it up along with its grounds. Even if read ironically, his regal sentiment in surveying the landscape suggests an independent moulding of the environment to his will, in line with the autonomy inherent to hegemonic French masculinity.

Promenades immobiles (2000) and *Meaulne, mon village* (2004) centre around the state-owned forests of Tronçais, where Philippe stag-hunted to hounds from his youth until his accident; from then, he continued to follow hunts, driven by his friend Jean-Louis, a lumberjack, until Jean-Louis's suicide following his injury in a 2007 workplace accident. Vigand evokes the forests and his love of all aspects of these spaces, their flora and fauna, in vivid chapters each dealing with a specific person in the rural community where he grew up, or his encounter in the forest with a stag or doe. In so doing, Vigand broadens the focus of his writing to embrace a rich panoply of people, places, and wild animals who have mattered to him: "qui me semblent 'vrais', chacun ayant un sens, un rôle identifié" (Vigand, 2004, 19). In a creative departure from his usual first-person

narration, Vigand includes three chapters in *Promenades immobiles* narrated by his hunting horse, his family dog, and a bloodhound. In each case, Vigand stresses the trust, complicity and shared pleasure of the human-animal relationship, in a move that could be read as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity and a recognition of the intertwining with otherness that constructs the human, or even "something else altogether, a shared trans-species being-in-the-world constituted by complex relations of trust, respect, dependence and communication" (Wolfe, 2010, 141).[4] Vigand's recognition that he is part of a trans-species continuum that has long pertained in rural France roots his identity in the distant past and the present where inherited traditions and values still endure.

Vigand represents his rural community as one bound up with and symbiotically merged with the forest as the *lieu privilégié* where community bonds are reinforced and tightened through shared experiences such as mushroom picking, walking, and highly ritualized stag hunting, which happens twice a week in autumn and winter. He affirms that he wants to depict "les dignes représentants d'une société rurale qui tend à disparaître" (2004, 13). The evocation of village life and the homosocial stag-hunting world is thus explicitly nostalgic in *Meaulne, mon village*, for which conservative politician Dominique de Villepin wrote a foreword where he notes how the book details "une société ancienne et secrète, liée par des valeurs ancestrales, unie par la passion de la terre et de la forêt" (2004, 9).

Sociologist Valentin Pelosse notes that "la sociabilité masculine [est la] caractéristique cynégétique par excellence" (Pelosse, 1988, 124). Vigand depicts the hunting milieu as male dominated. Established by his father in 1960, the Rallye l'Aumance, to which he belongs, is a private bourgeois hunt rather than a communal one. He loves hunting because his father introduced him to it early, but Vigand cites predatory instinct as the reason for his attachment to it (2000, 15; 2004, 60). "Je renonce à expliquer ici le plaisir que certains éprouvent à courir derrière une meute sur la voie d'un

animal: ce doit être dans les gènes" (1997, 77), Vigand states, before noting that this genetic heritage remains intact. Such biology-based argument is another example of essentialist gender construction in Vigand's work – but of course genetic links are generated via the natural world. Michel Bozon and Jean-Claude Chamboredan note that the depopulation of the French countryside means that hunting is becoming less a country-dweller habit than a rural bourgeois leisure activity, in which a strict hierarchy is observed in the division of labour. Their research shows that in bourgeois hunting, the emphasis is on the display and maintenance of individual social power. This is in direct contrast with 'la chasse populaire' which emphasizes the collective experience of the hunt as an exercise is strengthening the social fabric of the rural male community and its relationship to its *terroir*.[5] Yet Vigand shows how much activity that is peripheral or preparatory to hunting itself brings men together, irrespective of social class and occupation; in so doing, he aligns himself with 'chasse populaire' ideology. Through their meticulous individual explorations of the forest, tracking deer, and subsequent knowledge-sharing, hunters forge friendships that endure and sustain Vigand after he can no longer join in. Vigand feels indebted to Jean-Louis for facilitating his continued love of hunting after his accident: "Ma tristesse, immense, se double de regret: celui de n'avoir pas réussi à lui redonner ce qu'il m'avait insufflé" (2011, 78). Jean-Louis' death by suicide contrasts with Vigand's continued life; he could be regarded as a victim of the norms of autonomous masculinity that Vigand successfully moulded to his own changed circumstances. Class and wealth may play a role in this difference of outcome for the two friends.

Although women can and do participate in stag hunting in France, their role is severely circumscribed and subservient to male hunters and they are not permitted to kill the stag (Bruyer, 1997). This gendered division of labour upholds the stereotypical gender binary that equates masculinity with action and femininity with

passivity. Elisabeth Badinter notes that hunting has always been a quintessentially masculine activity (Badinter, 1986, 254) and that "la plupart des sociétés ont institué des droits et des activités interdits aux femmes, qui donnent aux hommes l'orgueil de leur virilité et leur apportent la paix due au sentiment d'un accomplissement irréversible" (282). In Vigand's writings, male friendships and collaboration in reconnoitring the forest and stags' movements weave the foundation for it. In fact, Vigand wastes no words on describing the climax of a hunt when the stag is killed and ritually dismembered. Instead, the very strong emotions he describes come from his familiarity with the terrain and its flora, and his solitary multi-sensory immersion in nature when he studies the forest and closely encounters deer (2000, 71-74; 2004, 102). Vigand dissolves into and fuses rhizomatically with the forest, and is profoundly moved when he gets close to or is approached by a deer: "Je ressentis l'impression inouïe d'être rentré dans son monde […] cette brève incursion dans l'univers des animaux m'avait comblé pour longtemps" (2000, 73-74).[6] Rosi Braidotti states that

> The posthuman in the sense of post-anthropocentrism displaces the dialectical scheme of opposition, replacing well-established dualisms with the recognition of deep *zoe*-egalitarianism between humans and animals. The vitality of their bond is based on sharing this planet, territory or environment on terms that are no longer so clearly hierarchical, nor self-evident. This vital interconnection posits a qualitative shift of the relationship away from species-ism and towards an ethical appreciation of what bodies (human, animal, others) can do. (Braidotti, 2013, 71-72)

Looking back on his life in the forest, rather than evoke the bloodlust of hunting, Vigand stresses his joy in feeling part of the animal world and his admiration for the deer, retrospectively privileging his interconnectedness with the forest over the stag hunt.

He resists heteronormative masculinity as dominating, subjugating force. Elsewhere, he uses bird metaphors – he needs a "nid douillet" (1997, 43) and wants a country house for his "future couvée" (2000, 93) when he gets married. Although these are clichés, by using them he places himself and his family within nature and the animal world, rather than in opposition to or above it. Enda McCaffrey notes that central to ecopoetics is a non-anthropocentric relationality that "undermines the autonomy of the ego-self and promotes a conception of identity ('eco-self') as a bridge to the non-human whilst acknowledging the situational context of the human relationship to the ecosphere" (McCaffrey, 30). Vigand's identification with nature is a reparative process for him, making him think differently about the forests and his place in relation to them.[7] Vigand articulates his attitude to the forest in the opening pages of *Promenades immobiles*:

> Le regard que l'on porte sur la forêt peut se transformer au gré des circonstances. Il y a dix ans encore, je réagissais comme un œnologue qui porte en lui l'éventail des saveurs et des odeurs lui permettant de reconnaître un vin. Poussé par l'instinct de prédation et l'ardeur de la poursuite, je ne voyais les arbres, les lignes forestières, les ruisseaux ou les étangs que comme des éléments composant le décor fugitif de la réussite ou de l'échec de ma journée de chasse. (2000, 15)

Vigand acknowledges his former indifference to the forest except as stage-set for his predatory hunting. Unable to participate in the hunt after his accident, his anthropocentric point-of-view changes and he writes to contemplate the forest in its entirety and recall his full engagement with it before and since his accident. This new absorption leads to a more nuanced, holistic appreciation of it. Notable chapters include "L'Intrus" where Vigand dwells on the liminal moments of dusk and dawn when he acknowledges animals' rights to their habitat and senses that his presence in the

forest becomes intrusive or ceases to be so. Another chapter, "Le chercheur de mues", describes the lifestyle of 33-year-old Etienne, who is the same age Philippe was when he had his accident. Despite his successful studies, Etienne eschews professional success. He does not hunt; instead, he spends all his holidays meticulously, secretly exploring the forest floor to find the antlers shed by growing stags. These "mues" adorn his home where "chacune possède son histoire" (2000, 164). By lauding Etienne's gentle approach to the forest and its stags, Vigand celebrates an alternative masculinity – one less concerned with high drama, bloodshed or domination than with contemplating the beauty of nature and the complex webs of interdependence and storytelling that link humanity and the natural world – and the health of the ecological system of the forest, which he repeatedly calls a "cathédrale", a holy space of worship (2000, 86, 88, 135). These (hi)stories – Etienne's and Vigand's – also connect with, and mould afresh, deeper ecological and philosophical narratives that have shaped and continue to shape modern France.

Having been obliged by his impairments to embrace different ways of inhabiting the world in general and the forest in particular, Vigand appreciates other men who do the same of their own volition. He admires other men for their intimate familiarity with the forests as much as their hunting prowess. Their visual fact-finding and physical confidence in the terrain might suggest a will to control nature, whose supreme symbol is the hunted stag. Nevertheless, Vigand's work shows how his perception of the forest and men's relationship with it deepened after 1990. Before his accident, "ma perception se limitait aux nécessités de l'action de chasse. Elle me suffisait cependant. Mieux même, elle me comblait" (2000, 16). On his first visit to the forest after his accident, a great stag is taken by the hunt, marking the end of a long life that has for many years been enmeshed with Vigand's own as he tracked and admired the animal: "Le grand cerf de la Boulée est mort le jour même où je renaissais. Une coïncidence inouïe a voulu que ce vieil animal soit pris quand

j'ai pu, un an après mon accident, revenir pour la première fois en forêt" (2000, 51). Vigand feels their respective simultaneous death and rebirth keenly. Identifying with his elusive old quarry, he grieves for the stag for a long time (2000, 52). The great stag's death in what is for Vigand the hallowed space of the forest, coinciding with Vigand's return to this beloved place that formed him, articulates both his profound, enduring ties to his *terroir*, and what he has lost due to his accident. Yet what he gains leads to his works, because he writes "not in spite of disability but because of disability" (Garland-Thomson, 2005, 524). Vigand concludes *Promenades immobiles* with a description of a safari in Zimbabwe with a local guide, Michel: "Une soudaine tristesse m'envahit. J'éprouvai, pour la première fois, le sentiment d'avoir trouvé ma vocation: j'aurais aimé devenir guide. Comme Michel" (2000, 188). *Promenades immobiles* fulfils Vigand's ambition, documenting the practical skills and patience needed to immerse oneself in his native forests and savour their manifold beauties. Taken together, Vigand's works show him to be both a new man and a nostalgic one. Nostalgia for a disappearing rural French way of life, for his past forest-roving self, and for France's once-mighty ancient forests now threatened by storms and decay pervades these books which, through both reminiscence and *témoignage*, reanimate Vigand's former self and preoccupations, and simultaneously underline his expanded sensitivity to and appreciation for the forests and the human and animal society they sustain. Hunting rituals and stories have their place there by virtue of having been so long embedded. Vigand maps the evolution of ancient French forests and French masculinity as it symbiotically merges with them.

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[1] Vigand's works will be referenced in this article using publication year and page number.

[2] Cf. Larkin, 'Dependence and Masculinity in Contemporary French Writing about Disability', in *L'Esprit Créateur*, 'French Autopathography' special

issue, Vol. 56, 2, 2016, 121-34, for a discussion of Vigand's representation of masculinity and the significance of new paternity for him.

[3] The number of French universities offering degrees in Gender Studies has increased rapidly in recent years and now includes courses at Paris VIII, Paris I, Lyon, Toulouse, and Rennes, among others: https://institut-du-genre.fr/fr/ressources/formations-de-masters-en-etudes-de/?code=master&titre_mot=&discipline=&universite=&pays=France.

[4] For a recent discussion of the human-animal relationship, cf. Roberto Marchesini, *Over the Human: Posthumanism and the Concept of Animal Epiphany* (2017).

[5] Michel Bozon and Jean-Claude Chamboredan state that "la chasse populaire représente un terrain privilégié d'expression des valeurs viriles: la société communale de chasse est peut-être une des formes les plus vigoureuses de la société des hommes" (Bozon and Chamboredon, 1980, 76).

[6] Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

[7] For a cogent summary of ecopoetics, the posthuman, and the links between ecosystems and human civilisation, cf. Enda McCaffrey (2020). I am grateful to Enda McCaffrey for bringing to my attention Marie Darrieussecq's 2017 forest-based novel *Notre vie dans les forêts*.

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