

“[W]riting protects us from the inevitable moment when the eraser wipes the blackboard clean”: An Interview with Patrick Autréaux — Cristina Politano

Patrick Autréaux is a French writer and physician whose most recent novel, Avenue des Amériques (Gallimard 2026) traces his ambivalence about his adopted country, the United States. The third installment in a five-volume cycle, Avenue des Amériques profiles several of the characters that the narrator encounters in the course of his time in the United States, raising compelling questions about identity, belonging, and exile. I sat down with Patrick Autréaux to discuss the thin line between fiction and autobiography, the debt that he owes to literary mysticism, as well as this novel's role within the broader literary cycle. The following is a translation of an e-mail exchange originally conducted in French.

Why did you choose the title *Avenue des Amériques* ? Aside from the fact that one of the main characters lives on this avenue, does the plural form of the term “Americas” have any special significance?

Each of my titles is the result of a somewhat random process. Sometimes, they impose themselves with authority. Often, they play hide-and-seek with the text. Usually, they make their appearance when the book ends. And I know how true this sense of relief is—the kind that comes when you discover something without really trying. In this case, the name of Sixth Avenue in New York expressed itself early on. To me, the Avenue of the Americas cuts through the city like a grand, poetic arrow; it has always struck me as a reminder of the diversity found in this country—the United States—and of the multitude it claims to unite. I have always seen this as a sign of a diversity that resists domestication. It was this plurality that convinced me. And then I knew that America—my America—whose contours I wanted to sketch, could only be diverse: it bears witness to the immensity of the imaginary lands of the New World. A way of playing with clichés. This title is like a palimpsest; it echoes migrations, successive waves of colonization, and massacres, but also all the worlds that people dream of.

This is the third installment in a series. How does it fit in with the other works?

Avenue des Amériques forms with *L'Époux* a diptyque in a five-volume cycle. Inaugurated with *La Sainte de la famille*, this cycle is supposed to conclude with two other books, which I've already partially written. *Avenue des Amériques* and *L'Époux* are, I believe, at the heart of the collection, and are dedicated to love and to what wounds it. *L'Époux* tells the story of a couple over the course of more than thirty years and follows a fairly straightforward narrative arc. *Avenue* evokes a turbulent period in this romantic story and complements *L'Époux* by exploring the choices, hesitations, and twists and turns of a long-term romantic relationship (excerpt published by Tolka, Issue 10).

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How do you approach these cycles of books? And how do you feel when you've completed a cycle?

I never know what will unfold when I start a book. Sometimes it's just one volume, and sometimes it gives rise to a collection. I open up zones of writing where I explore and create at the same time. Then at a certain point, a sort of silhouette or presence appears, which I call my book. It is this "ghost" of something that does not yet exist that I try to bring to life through words. I've written two cycles: the first (untitled, about my illness) was born from an initial story, *Dans la vallée des larmes*, which, as soon as it was finished, inspired two texts, *Soigner*, and *Se survivre*, and then the story of the slow process of how they were written, *La Voix écrite*. The second cycle is the one that includes *Avenue des Amériques*. This project, entitled *Constat*, revealed itself to me almost all at once, beginning with the first book, *La Sainte de la famille*, and as an already outlined or defined collection. It all began without me really deciding to do it, after years of thinking about a book that would interweave—just as memories do—different periods of a life marked by key events: childhood grief, amorous encounter, medical vocation, terminal diagnosis, difficult convalescence, impossible return, etc... When I catch sight of the culmination—or at least the end—of a cycle (and that's the case with *Constat*, which I'll be finishing soon), I feel a mix of relief and anxiety. This awakens a threat: that of my own imminent erasure. Perhaps writing protects us from the inevitable moment when the eraser wipes the blackboard clean, leaving behind nothing but a whitish haze—ashes or chalky residue—and then nothing but a little dirt. It is this anxiety that prevails—worse than the fear of death—because it lacks the purity of nothingness.

How would you categorize this text? Autobiography? Autofiction? Fiction? How important do you view the question of literary genre and how do you approach the question of the authorial "I"?

This question of genre troubled me for a long time when I was beginning to write, and long before I published my first book (it was preceded by about ten unpublished and unpublishable manuscripts). I feel like an outsider when it comes to autofiction, but I don't feel completely alien to it either. While "autobiographical novel" is a somewhat dated term, "fiction" is easy to apply, basically accurate, but still somehow inadequate. One could call it a "true novel," as is often said of 17th-century memoirs (La Rochefoucauld or Retz, to cite the most famous). I wavered between these descriptions. It's a way—albeit a rather simplistic one—of asking ourselves what we do when what we're doing gets out of our control. Genre has become less important—almost trivial at this point—and I like to say that I liken my work to the "autobiographical writings of mystics" because of a construction of meaning (or non-meaning) that unites inner experience (see Bataille) and life events, as well as a way of thinking about the world and the society into which one is born. This also requires analyzing oneself through multiple frameworks (psychoanalysis, sociology, historical context, etc.). For me, writing means living intimately within time. One critic described me as a literary mystic. I find this perspective quite relevant. This implies that the "I" that I use tends toward a form of impersonality similar to that pursued by mystics. It's a paradox: writing in order to make oneself as transparent as possible is an approach that stands in direct opposition to any form of narcissistic excess, because it erodes the ego, sifts it in the wind, and reduces it to a hollowed-out shell that nonetheless manages to carry resonance. "Blessed are the poor in

spirit” is one of my favorite sayings. The autobiographical elements and the contexts of the narrative serve as a pretext for lending shape to what becomes elusive when we dismantle the most superficial constructs of the self: they reveal nothing but the intimacy of a presence that speaks to the reader all the more effectively because it is both itself and, constantly, other than itself. In this respect, I feel a kinship with writers and “godless mystics” such as Soares, Pessoa, Kafka, Blanchot, Lispector in *Água Viva*, for example, or even Duras.

You have chosen to write this novel in the second person, the narrator addressing himself to a lover whose name is never mentioned and who, despite his anonymity, plays a prominent role throughout the course of the text. Could you expand on your decision to use the second person to structure the novel?

Avenue des Amériques is linked to *L'Époux*, which is written entirely in the vocative case. The “you” here refers to the lover-husband; it is also a broader “you”—a lover or friend. And this “you” echoes the “you” found in spiritual writings—whether it refers to the invisible Bridegroom or the inner confidant. I often quote from Carmelite writings, particularly those of John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux. Other examples include Raymond Lull and his *Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, or Hafez, Rumi, Rabia Basri, and Nachman of Breslov. In *La Sainte de la famille*, the second-person pronoun “you” was already very prevalent and was directed at Thérèse—at her imagined presence—not as a saint but as a “therapist”—that is, as a presence that listens and remains silent. The use of the second person pronoun is a delicate matter; using it systematically can quickly come across as artificial. If this pronoun has emerged as a narrative linchpin and an organic necessity of the book, it is because it existed before the book was written: the living and the dead (loved ones, authors, characters, etc.) are within me like birds in an internal aviary, and I constantly address them. In the two volumes that will conclude *Constat*, however, the “you” will be less prevalent, because, alongside the central characters, I will need to more firmly adopt the perspective of the angel looking back upon the ruins of life.

The novel features different characters: Génia, Joe, Greg, Linh, and the anonymous “you.” Génia emerges as the most important. How does this character embody the narrator’s ambivalence about the United States?

In the labyrinth that New York represents for the narrator, Génia personifies Pasiphaë or Diotima (“the stranger from Mantinea,” according to Socrates): the one that conveys a certain ineffable something that transforms you. A stranger—if not in exile, then at least out of place. A Jew of the diaspora, French by birth and of Russian descent, Spanish at heart, transgressive yet without perversion—the woman who served as the model for Génia liked to say, as a true nonbeliever and spiritual atheist, steeped in Buddhism and other religious traditions: “The displaced are closer to God.” She saw America as her country of welcome, which was never really welcoming: a country that failed to understand its exiles. She was resentful because, despite all the grand rhetoric, her family had been forced to wait for a very long time at the gates of fear. They were granted a visa to escape Nazi Europe only at the very last moment. Overwhelmed by her forced journey, she felt misunderstood by a society at peace that remained distant from the Brown Plague of Nazism. A critique that remains quite relevant today! But this woman’s story touched me deeply. Ever since I was a child, I’ve been surrounded by people who were, to varying degrees, in exile, and who spoke with accents different from mine (even though I’m supposed to speak without one). Exiled from their families, from their countries. People in exile, whether by choice or as a result of historical tragedies. But Génia’s ambivalence—and mine—stems from her experience with violence

(anti-Semitism in her case; homophobia in mine) and from a distrust of any overly assertive identity, of any full embrace of a host country, and of any “national narrative”—regardless of the nation in question. If I remain ambivalent toward this America—just as I am toward my country of origin—it is also because its complexity cannot be reduced to one simplistic idealization or one simplistic critique. It’s the multifaceted and the contradictory that draw me in. Génia embodies that, and she knows how to have fun with it.

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Can you expand on the importance of the narrator’s decision to pursue his calling as an artist even though he comes from a working-class family?

I (and the narrator) have never viewed my artistic calling as a calling. In fact, I have serious reservations about this term, which often masks a form of predeterminism, regardless of its origin. In my case, for a long time I believed I had a calling to medicine, and I became a doctor: But that very powerful pull that compelled me seems to me to be more closely linked to the unconscious role I took on at a very young age toward the sick and bereaved members of my family, and to try to compensate for family dysfunction... And besides, being an artist is also a social role; and I, as a true class defector, dreamed of what transcended the social: I dreamed of flying, not of climbing the ladder. Some might find that naive; it’s a poor man’s defense. It is in this sense that the mystics moved me (often women or those suspected of heresy), for I saw in their passion a promise of escape. As a defector and a gay man, as a self-imposed exile and someone in love with a man from a different culture and background—that’s how I feel. Although the allure of the exotic was ever-present in me as a teenager, it was always diversity that I sought—the “other.” This is a theme explored by an author I really like: Victor Segalen. Naval physician, poet, and sinologist. His novel about the destruction of Maori culture, *A Lapse of Memory*, had a profound impact on me when I was young, and his essay on exoticism is, for me, one of the key books on the experience of being a foreigner and of otherness.

You write, “Mais les doutes, je ne devais pas les écouter, je n’en avais plus le luxe. N’était-ce pas là le lot des artistes et des saints, des gens pétris par la nécessité ?” Can you elaborate on the link between the artist and the saint?

I think I’ve already responded to this in part. To write is to inhabit time. It is also an attempt to give shape to what dwells within the fissure, to what makes its voice heard through the crack, to what brings the inanimate to life, to what awakens the dead within our lives, to the dazzling terror, to the reawakened joy that Deleuze cites, to the resistance against everything that obstructs us, that confines us, that limits us too quickly, that asserts definitively. Writing is an attempt to give shape to everything that results from the explosion/implosion of our encounter with the unknown or the unexpected. It is as much the artist’s experience as it is the saint’s. I have often spoken of the “big bang” that was that terminal diagnosis when I was in my thirties, which led me to experience the starting point from which I began: a sort of ecstasy in the face of my possible annihilation, a state beyond fear, that terrifying fullness of the “self without self” (see *Dans la vallée des larmes*, tr. *In the Valley of Tears*, UIT Books). All my work in its current form stems from that.

On the topic of his chemotherapy and recovery, the narrator affirms, “Non, cette maladie n’est pas une métaphore,” an explicit reference to Susan Sontag’s study *Illness*

as Metaphor. How would you explain the persistence of this confusion between biological disease and metaphor?

A wilderness of pain (the expression comes from Jim Morrison) was the title of a chapter from my book *Se survivre*. In it, I discussed the “poésie noire de la douleur.” Illness is the untamed body; it is that which eludes our will and our words: so we seek to define it in order to prevent contagion through signs. There is a genuine need for meaning arising from the anxiety caused by this confrontation with our own disorder (see the anthropological literature on this subject, e.g., *Le Sens du mal* by Marc Augé and Claudine Herzlich). Even though metaphors can sometimes resolve psychological issues (I know this firsthand as a former therapist), what always bothers me about metaphors and psychosomatic explanations is the singularity of the causal relationships they invoke. But as soon as we open ourselves up to the multiplicity of possibilities, I breathe a sigh of relief. I’d rather continue looking than jump to conclusions too quickly. We certainly need explanations to ease our anxiety about the unknown and the inexplicable. It’s a play on a certain poetics of illness (see Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill* and Frigyes Karinthy’s *A Journey Round My Skull*) and a non-poetic reasoning—between a frontal and sidelong view. We can only glimpse the horizon of death obliquely or through a mirror.

The novel is about the narrator’s ambivalence concerning the adoption of an American identity, and yet a second country emerges as equally significant: Vietnam. Can you elaborate on your decision to juxtapose the author’s life in the United States alongside his life in Vietnam?

I traced the roots of a contradiction in my life, one tied to the vagaries of my youth: through a friend from my teenage years, I discovered Vietnam and grew deeply attached to it; then, after meeting my partner, I turned my back on it in favor of America, a place I hadn’t wanted to go. I’ve retained a deep longing for Vietnam, where I made friends—notably an elderly dissident poet in Hanoi who has since passed away (I mention him in *Se survivre* and *Avenue des Amériques*). Love and life led me to the opposite end of the Earth. Ever since, I have been torn between my experiences in America and my imagination of Vietnam, between the life I love and the longing for another life—or at least for “more life.” This parallel, I believe, illustrates that thirst for diversity I mentioned—a thirst that only literature, or art more broadly, can truly satisfy.

[M]y “written voice” became homothetic to that voice inside me when I write—something like a thought taking shape, something like a chant, which is neither a spontaneous voice nor a chance emanation, but rather the result of persistent effort.

Can you elaborate on your influences and on how you developed your literary style?

My style? That’s a question I’ve often asked myself, and it has become just as irrelevant to me as trying to define my voice itself. I think I kept asking myself this question until my “written voice” became homothetic to that voice inside me when I write—something like a thought taking shape, something like a chant, which is neither a spontaneous voice nor a chance emanation, but rather the result of persistent effort. Then, there’s the question of narrative structure. I have mentioned this a few times in connection with my way of conceiving of time, which appears to me as space (a phenomenon known as “spatio-temporal synesthesia”). Yet I believe I now write about a certain form of time, as I see it—and thus in three dimensions, with its twists and turns, rather than in a linear fashion (let’s not forget that

there are other conceptions of time beyond the Western Hegelian one—for example, that of the Aboriginal peoples, as described by Bruce Chatwin in *The Songlines*, where space is measured by the duration of a narrative). Style is the verbal expression of a writer's most intimate traits (as Buffon famously said, “*Le style, c'est l'homme*”)—those traits of which we are scarcely aware, much like the voice when it falters due to emotion or a loss of control (which happens to me very often). At least, that was the choice (or was it a need?) I made—this homothety of the inner voice—as I wrote... While memory and time are obviously linked, I need to clarify one point: drawing on one's memory does not mean writing down one's memories. There is no nostalgia when I write, nor any settling of scores. In fact, I eliminate anything that makes me feel like I'm addressing someone in a more personal way. And while *Constat* may read like a testimony, its only message is this: that this particular life actually existed. I reconstruct the past from a temporal framework that is very well represented by the future perfect—the tense used to state facts in French. As I mentioned earlier, I feel a bit like W. Benjamin's “Angel of History”—even though it's the story of a conscience (Thérèse of Lisieux, for her part, had written as much in *The Story of a Soul*)...

As for literary models, it is very difficult to find any that are decisive. I have read and still read a great deal; as a result, I was influenced at a young age by Montaigne, Saint-Simon, Proust, and Céline (the Céline of the German trilogy), but also by Bataille, Genet, Simon, Duras, Kateb Yacine, Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *The Ambiguous Adventure*, and the Surrealists (Péret, Breton), right up to the essays of Annie Le Brun. Among non-French-speaking authors figure Melville and Thoreau, Dickinson, Borges, Thomas Mann, Lispector, Bernhard, Svevo, Bassani, Rulfo, the short stories of Miyazawa, Kerouac, Woolf, and Sterne—a list that is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. And I'll mention the books I still reread: *Moby Dick*, *Walden*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, *The Death of Virgil*, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, *Don Quixote*, certain stories by François Augiéras or texts by Breton, and, as always, the Bible and the Greeks. But the most influential, as I've already mentioned, were less literary authors than spiritual figures (even though I don't share their beliefs)—Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, the two Thérèses (the Great and the Little), Pascal, and then philosophers like Deleuze, Simone Weil, Freud, and Winnicott... Just to add a note, everything I've just said here pertains to the work I've done so far: alongside this *Constat* cycle, I've discovered another voice or path (*voix/voie*) within myself, although it's too early to discuss it in detail. This is a voice or a path that unquestionably falls within the realm of fiction and stands in stark contrast to what I've done so far (even though, in my view, any autobiographical reinterpretation is a form of fiction). It may be that writing about the adventures of this “I” has in fact eroded that self, and that, as a result of this erosion, another presence—another “I”—has come into being. *As if the Sea should part / and show a further Sea*, writes Dickinson. And is this not what we call fiction? The life or work of another author within the author we believe ourselves to be—which turns him, and us, into just another work of fiction.

Avenue des Amériques is now [available](#) from Gallimard.

Patrick Autréaux is a French writer and former emergency psychiatrist. He lives between Paris and Cambridge, Massachusetts. The view of illness as an inner experience informs his first cycle of writing, ending with *Se survivre* (Verdier). He is the author of a dozen of books and many articles in French. His most recent novel, *Avenue des Amériques*, was published by

Gallimard in Spring 2026. Translated English works include his first book *In The Valley of Tears* (UIT Books) as well as essays in *Socrates on the Beach*, *Asymptote*, *AGNI*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Tolka*, *Sublunary Editions*, *3:AM Magazine*, and *Black Herald Magazine*. *Pussyboy* (Verdier), a novel about an erotic passion, was translated and published in Spanish by *Canta Mares* (Mexico) in 2024.

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