

A Countdown of Lives

On Wednesday January 17th Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt's conference, which I attended, took place in Lyon. This event has been organised for the students of the region at the occasion of the French release of Auster's latest novel, 4321.

Paul Auster has been mainly known for his work of the New York Trilogy, which he was highly inspired for by his relationship with his town, New York. In 4321, his personal achievement as a writer, Auster drains this time his own life to give us a quadruple-narrative story deeply anchored in his past.



Welcome in the « bildungsroman » of Archibald Ferguson and his four parallel lives. The book follows the growth of Archie through the early second half of the 20th century, which takes four different paths, depending on the events he encounters. An « *epigenetic story of quadruplets* », this is how his wife, the author Siri Hustvedt called it, linking the story-telling with the influence of environment on DNA replication.

I agree that 1070 pages can make you feel uncomfortable. However you shouldn't be neither impressed as I was, nor scared, but excited to enter this « *elephant* » (in Auster's words), owing to the fact that you will discover a brand new reading experience that I didn't expect. The four-part narrative structure allows the reader to compare or judge the different lives, and can result in a preference for one above the others. Indeed, it leads the reader to recognize himself in one of the four characters and to get attached to him (or the contrary), which means he will have divergent states of involvement depending on the part he is reading. This process depends on who the reader is, so everyone can experience the reading differently, which is in my opinion the strength of this book.

Furthermore, by splitting his book's structure, Auster is able to dive in many themes, from the existence of a god to late-teenage anxiousness, and is free to share detailed and mastered descriptions or digressions. That « *Dance of words* » he evokes himself gives the feeling of a complex, deep and complete story as you enjoy an insight of America through both same and different Archie's eyes.

The reading of 4321 raised several questions, so it was an unexpected chance to be able to attend such an event that was the conference. As Auster and his wife were answering prepared questions from the students, I was finally able to look at the book in its complete aspect. Indeed, Auster explained the book's strong autobiographic background, advancing that « *to write about a character you first have to look through yourself* », supported by Hustvedt who added that memory and imagination were humanly linked. The exchange led to a better understanding of both authors, including their motivations as writers and the complicity between them, which in their opinion influences their work.



I strongly advise you to jump into Archie's world and to follow me into the discovery of Siri's work, though you should maybe keep an eye on your incoming exams...

Simon D.