

The Kindly Ones

Les Bienveillantes

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Jonathan Littell's novel *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*), first published in French in 2006, is a landmark work of historical fiction that interrogates the representation of perpetrators, the nature of evil, and the formation of collective memory.

Told through the first-person narrative of Maximilien Aue, a fictional former SS officer, the novel examines the complex relationship between narrative perspective, moral responsibility, and the literary representation of extreme violence during the Holocaust and the Second World War.

Blending meticulous historical reconstruction with philosophical reflection and an unsettling exploration of human subjectivity, *Les Bienveillantes* raises profound questions about the ethics of identification, the limits of representation, and the role of literature in confronting historical trauma.

Jonathan Littell (b. 1967) is an American-born French writer and former humanitarian worker.

Before *Les Bienveillantes*, he had published mainly in English, including the espionage novel *Bad Voltage* (1989), but remained largely unknown as a literary figure. The publication of *Les Bienveillantes* marked his breakthrough as a French-language author and an extraordinary literary debut, making him almost immediately a central figure in debates surrounding historical fiction, memory, and the representation of extreme violence.

Les Bienveillantes (*The Kindly Ones*) was first published in French by Gallimard in 2006. The novel became a major literary event, receiving the Prix Goncourt and the Grand prix du roman de l'Académie française in the same year. Its commercial success and international reception transformed it into one of the most debated works of contemporary historical fiction. Its significance, however, derives not only from its literary achievement but also from the controversy surrounding its attempt to represent the Holocaust and the Second World War through the consciousness of a perpetrator.

The novel is narrated by Maximilien Aue, a fictional former SS officer who recounts his life after the Second World War. At the beginning of the novel, Aue is living under a new identity as a successful businessman in postwar France. From this position, he retrospectively reconstructs his experiences during the Nazi period, presenting himself simultaneously as a witness, participant, analyst, and interpreter of history. He is not an innocent observer of historical events but a perpetrator directly involved in the machinery of Nazi occupation and genocide. Aue's position as narrator is central to the novel's complexity. He is a first-person homodiegetic narrator whose account is shaped by memory, self-interpretation, and intellectual reflection. His narration constantly oscillates between confession and detachment: he describes acts of extreme violence in a calm, bureaucratic, and analytical manner, often emphasizing systems, institutions, and historical forces rather than his own personal responsibility. This creates the figure of an unreliable narrator whose intelligence and self-awareness coexist with profound moral blindness. Through Aue's voice, Littell explores the

disturbing question of how an educated and cultured individual can become an active participant in mass violence.

The novel follows Aue's trajectory through Nazi-controlled Europe from the beginning of the Second World War to the collapse of the Third Reich. As an SS officer associated with the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), he participates in the activities of the Einsatzgruppen during Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. His journey takes him through occupied territories and major sites of Nazi violence, including Ukraine, the Caucasus, Stalingrad, France, Hungary, and Berlin during the final days of the regime. Through this geographical movement, Littell connects Aue's personal history with the broader realities of the Holocaust, the Eastern Front, Nazi occupation, collaboration, and the destruction of the Third Reich. Among the historical events represented in the novel are Operation Barbarossa, the mass shootings carried out by the Einsatzgruppen, the Babi Yar massacre, the Battle of Stalingrad, the administration of deportation and extermination policies, and the final collapse of Nazi Germany during the Battle of Berlin. Rather than presenting these events from the perspective of victims or external observers, Littell reconstructs them through the consciousness of a perpetrator embedded within the Nazi system. This narrative choice is one of the primary reasons for the novel's critical controversy.

Aue's personal history further complicates his identity. Born in Alsace to a German father and a French mother, he grows up between different linguistic and national identities, reflecting the unstable borders of twentieth-century Europe. His father disappears during his childhood, while his mother later marries a French collaborator. His relationship with his twin sister Una becomes one of the defining psychological elements of his life. Their incestuous attachment represents one of the novel's most controversial forms of transgression, connecting themes of desire, memory, identity, and psychological fragmentation. Aue's sexuality is another important dimension of his character. He is homosexual, which places him in a paradoxical position within Nazi society, a regime that persecuted homosexual men as part of its broader project of social and racial control. Littell uses this contradiction not to explain or excuse Aue's crimes, but to examine the fragmentation of individual identity under totalitarianism. His private identity does not prevent him from serving a regime whose ideology contradicts aspects of his own existence. Instead, the novel emphasizes the disturbing possibility that personal marginalization, intellectual sophistication, or private contradictions do not necessarily prevent participation in systems of oppression. Aue's life is marked by numerous transgressions, including incest, murder, betrayal, and participation in genocide. These acts place him at the intersection of personal pathology and historical violence. Littell refuses to present him as either a purely monstrous figure or a tragic victim; rather, Aue becomes an example of how ideology, bureaucracy, ambition, and individual choice can combine to produce criminal behavior.

From a narratological perspective, the novel's most controversial feature is its decision to grant narrative authority to a perpetrator. The reader does not encounter Nazi crimes through an external moral framework but through the consciousness of someone who participated in them. The opening sentence immediately establishes this problematic relationship between narrator and reader: "Frères humains, laissez-moi vous raconter comment ça s'est passé" ("Brothers of men, let me tell you how it happened"). The phrase recalls François Villon's *Ballade des pendus* (*Ballad of the Hanged Men*) and creates an unsettling tone of intimacy and appeal. By addressing the reader as a "brother," Aue attempts to establish a human connection before revealing the extent of his crimes. This rhetorical strategy became one of the central points of debate surrounding the novel.

The use of a perpetrator narrator places *Les Bienveillantes* within a broader discussion about the

possibilities and limits of literary representation. In *Conversation sur l'histoire et la littérature*, Littell and Pierre Nora discuss the relationship between historical knowledge and literary invention, particularly the question of how fiction can approach events that are already heavily shaped by historical memory.

The novel's narrative strategy also connects it to a longer literary tradition of representing perpetrators from within their own perspectives. Jorge Luis Borges's "Deutsches Requiem" ("German Requiem," 1946), for example, presents a condemned Nazi officer who reflects on his ideology and crimes before execution. Like Aue, Borges's narrator is educated, articulate, and capable of constructing an intellectual justification for his actions. However, while Borges presents the Nazi voice as a brief philosophical meditation on fanaticism and nihilism, Littell expands this approach into a large-scale historical novel that follows a perpetrator through the mechanisms of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

The controversy surrounding *Les Bienveillantes* was intensified by questions concerning the ethics of representing perpetrators. Supporters of Littell's novel, however, argued that the purpose of Aue's narration is not to justify his actions but to expose the mechanisms of ideological indoctrination, bureaucratic violence, and moral self-deception.

Historians and Holocaust scholars also examined the novel's relationship to historical accuracy. While Littell's extensive research and reconstruction of Nazi institutions, military operations, and extermination policies have been widely recognized, some questioned the boundary between documented historical reality and literary invention, especially in passages involving private experiences, psychological states, and sensory details that cannot be directly verified. Such debates highlight the tension between historical reconstruction and the imaginative demands of fiction (Suleiman).

Ultimately, *Les Bienveillantes* remains one of the most debated works of contemporary historical fiction because it challenges literature's ability to confront extreme violence while forcing readers to examine the boundaries between understanding, representation, and moral judgment.

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